

#08



Amagi Brilliant Park

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VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM



Amagi
Brilliant
Park
#08





KANIE SEIYA

SENTO ISUZU

LATIFAH
FLEURANZA

**IT'S THE SEASON
FOR HIKING!**
PACK A LUNCH AND SEE THE
LEAVES CHANGE COLOR!
MAYBE THE PARK WILL CREATE
A SURVIVAL EXPERIENCE
SIMULATION AREA?





"I'm
afraid...
What's
going to
happen?"

She didn't
resist.
She stood up,
then lay down
on the bed as
instructed.
On that big,
soft bed...
His vision had
finally adjust-
ed to the
dark, and he
could see her
eyes now, wet
with tears.

Let's have
a look at
everyone's
dreams!

KHOROSHO...
SPASIBO...

MADE IT...
IN TIME...

NO,
SEIYA-KUN...
THE
CUCUMBER...

MORE...
MISO SOUP...
MORE...

I...
I PROMISE...
///

GOOD MORNING...
EVERYONE?

contents

PROLOGUE

005

015

**I. KANIE SEIYA
HAS NO DRIVE**

053

2. EXODUS

079

3. IN THE RUINS

**4. HOTEL
CALIFORNIA**

109

5. NICK OF TIME

164

**AMAGI HIGH SCHOOL
CULTURE FESTIVAL!**

222

213

EPILOGUE

262

**BRILLIANT REPORT
(APOLOGY EDITION)**

AFTERWORD

283

Amagi Brilliant Park #08

Prologue

Case A

Family Y living in western Tokyo (City H) Father: Works at a foodstuffs company (45) Mother: Housewife (39) Son: Elementary school (9) *Daughter: Elementary school (7)*

[After dinner]

Son: “Hey, let’s go to AmaBri! The Variable Moffle campaign ends next Sunday! We can still get it if we go now! Variable Moffle! We gotta go!”

Daughter: “I wanna dance with the ABC ladies! I wanna be an idol! I wanna go to AmaBri!”

Mom: “What are you talking about? We went to AmaBri last year, and you spent the entire time bored!”

Son: “Aw, but...”

Mom: “Daddy took time out of his busy schedule to take you, but you hated it! Have you forgotten already?”

Daughter: “Nuh-uh! Nuuuh-uhhhh!”

Mom: “Oh, these children! Say something to them, dear!”

Dad: “Ah... well, I might like to see Elementario, myself.”

Mom: “What? What was that?”

Dad: “Oh... nothing.”

Son: “I get it! Elementario’s sexy! Real sexy! I saw Daddy grinning at pictures of the Spirit of Wind lady on his smartphone!”

Mom: “.....”

Dad: “Th-That’s preposterous. I was researching local celebrities for a promotional campaign. For work! ...And I wasn’t grinning that much.”

Mom: “Ah... I’ve seen them on pamphlets. You can’t really want to use those

cheap women in tawdry outfits.”

Dad: “Hey!”

Mom: “What?” (glares) Dad: “Ah... nothing. You’re right.”

Mom: “And why were you grinning at her on your smartphone?”

Dad: “I wasn’t! Our son is spreading malicious lies.”

Daughter: “I like Salama!”

Dad: “Oh, uh... do you?”

Son: “She’s sexy! I like Kobory!”

Mom: “Both of you! Stop this ‘sexy’ talk right—”

Dad: “I...”

Mom: “Dear?”

Dad: “I... I like Sylphie!!!”

Mom: “Dear?!”

Dad: “The tits! The tits!”

Daughter: “Daddy’s broken!”

Dad: “Permit me a rant! Sylphie-san looks just like a Hollywood actress I loved when I was in middle school! The golden 80s! I went breathless for her! That was thirty years ago! And lately I’ve been working through a midlife crisis, and I don’t get breathless over any women at all! Whenever there’s a news story about a man my age getting arrested for groping on the train... I feel secretly jealous of the perpetrator! I mean... imagine being my age and being unable to restrain yourself on a crowded train... it’s enviable, isn’t it?!”

Mom: “Dear?!”

Dad: “There, in my darkest hour, Sylphie-san appeared like a ray of light! I can still get it up! I can still get breathless! And I can also apply myself at my job!”

Mom: “But what about me?!”

Dad: “But you said it before, dear! You called their outfits tawdry! You wouldn’t do it, would you? You wouldn’t cosplay as Sylphie?!”

Mom: “Y-You know that I wouldn’t!”

Daughter: “I-I’ll do it, Dad! Calm down!”

Dad: “Daughter! That would mean nothing! Only human garbage would get breathless for his daughter!”

Daughter: “You’re already human garbage!”

Dad: “So be it, then! Darn it, we’re going to AmaBri this weekend! One eyeful of the Elementario show will sustain me for the rest of my life!”

Son: “I don’t think I wanna go to AmaBri anymore...”

Daughter: “Same...”

Case B

Couple attending Private University C, Tokyo Suburbs Mr. A: Law student, 3rd year (21) Ms. B: Literature student, 3rd year (20)

Mr. A: “Where do you wanna go this Saturday?”

Ms. B: “Oh, anywhere’s fine...”

Mr. A: “How about AmaBri? I’ve heard it’s gotten way better since the renovation.”

Ms. B: “Huh? AmaBri? No way... I heard it’s awful.”

Mr. A: “Yeah, but I told you, they had a renovation.”

Ms. B: “Yeah, but... still...”

Mr. A: “...Okay, fine. Hmm... what about Tama Kartland?”

Ms. B: “Huh? Tama Kartland? Never heard of it...”

Mr. A: “It’s near school. It’s got go-karts. It’s fun!”

Ms. B: “I’m not much of a driver...”

Mr. A: “O-Okay... Well, what else is good? Hmm... what about Sanrio Crystal Land? It’s for girls and it’s indoors, so we can still go if it rains.”

Ms. B: “Oh, that’s for kids. I went there a ton in elementary school.”

Mr. A: “...I see. How about Kochiragaoka Playground? It’s a little on the old

side, of course...”

Ms. B: “No way. I went there with my ex. Bad memories.”

Mr. A: “..... Okay...”

Ms. B: “A, are you mad?”

Mr. A: “Huh? Of course not. Um... um... let’s see, where to go, then...”

Ms. B: “Seriously, I don’t care. Just pick someplace already!”

Mr. A: “Um... nothing’s coming to mind. Um...”

Ms. B: “Mr. A, you’re really not mad?”

Mr. A: “I’m really not mad... But I really do hear AmaBri’s good recently. A friend from my class went and said it was really fun.”

Ms. B: “A friend? Who? A girl?”

Mr. A: “No, a guy. And AmaBri offers a discount for local students—”

Ms. B: “A *guy* was going to an amusement park? Was it really a guy?”

Mr. A: “Yeah. Anyway, he said AmaBri was great. It’s just a bus ride away from Tsubakigaoka—”

Ms. B: “I think you’re hiding something.”

Mr. A: “Huh? Like what?”

Ms. B: “It was really a girl, wasn’t it?”

Mr. A: “I told you, no. He’s got a girlfriend at his part-time job, so they probably went there on a date.”

Ms. B: “Why’d you say it like that? You *are* mad, aren’t you?”

Mr. A: “I told you, I’m not mad!”

Ms. B: “You are *so* mad! You wouldn’t keep lying otherwise. You’re not answering me. Are you that worked up right now? And just who is this friend of yours?”

Mr. A: “Is it the amusement park that’s the problem? Should I pick another kind of place?”

Ms. B: “Why are you being like this? I said I don’t care! This is crazy!”

Mr. A: “But...”

Ms. B: “See, you’re lying. You went to AmaBri with that girl, didn’t you?”

Mr. A: “It was a guy. You’re not giving me much to work with here...”

Ms. B: “I’m not, huh? You don’t like being with me. Is that it, A?”

Mr. A: “That’s not true. I like being with you.”

Ms. B: “Why can’t you just be honest? I hate this.”

Mr. A: “Look, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m sorry, but... I am.”

Ms. B: “Why are you apologizing? Did you do something you feel guilty about?”

Mr. A: “Um, er... that’s not what I...”

[Argument continues on endless loop]

Case C

Chiba Family, living in Amagi City, Tokyo Mrs. Chiba, Housewife (38) Son Chiba, Elementary School Student (7)

[Night, before bed]

Son Chiba: “Mommy... I wanna go to AmaBri! I wanna go to AmaBri!”

Mrs. Chiba: “Oh, you silly. You just went there last week. But I suppose you are at that amusement park age... hee hee...”

Son Chiba: “But I wanna go! AmaBri’s full of parents on the brink of divorce and college couples on the rocks!”

Mrs. Chiba: “Oh, listen to you! I always tell you, when you see people like that, you should always look the other way!”

Son Chiba: “But I like to bear witness to the darkness within others! Does that make me weird?”

Mrs. Chiba: “Of course not, dear! With your daddy working halfway across the country, my super sexy body is going to waste. You know that Tiramii-san asks me to rub his tummy? Oh, yes... I certainly understand how you feel!”

Son Chiba: “Mommy! I’m so happy!”

Mrs. Chiba: “My son! My son! Yes, let’s go! AmaBri really is that kind of place... It’s not for normal kinds of fun!”

Son Chiba: “Yeah. So let’s go to AmaBri! For the fun you find under the surface.”

Mrs. Chiba: “Yes, let’s go to AmaBri! For the fun you find under the surface.”

[They go harmoniously the next day.]

1: Kanie Seiya Has No Drive

The class representative spoke, her back to the blackboard. “Um, so by majority vote, our class will be running a cafe.”

This announcement was met with sporadic applause. The writing on the blackboard said: “Cafe: 12 votes. Maid Cafe: 8 votes. Butler Cafe: 5 votes. Sumo Cafe: 2 votes.” Every option was some kind of cafe.

What the hell even is a ‘Sumo Cafe’? Kanie Seiya wondered. He was gazing ahead blankly with his head on his desk, seated in the center seat of the class’s front row. He’d spent most of homeroom dozing, so he hadn’t heard the descriptions given by the presenters. He missed his old seat in the last row next to the window; the so-called “protagonist seat.” They’d changed seating at random during the start of the second term, and this was where Seiya had ended up. It was the worst seat possible for him...

Being right in front of the teacher meant that he couldn’t check the park’s accounts or employee schedules for the various areas. Nor could he respond to emails. This location made it harder to nap, too; the best he could do was a little daydreaming in homeroom. With elbows on the desk and head resting on top of them, he could assume an “awake-like posture” and get in a very welcome five to ten minutes.

The culture festival, huh... he mused. The most annoying event of the year. *I don’t have time for those ridiculous “everyone comes together!” rites of passage.*

But cafes... that reminds me. The tasting for the cafe corner is tonight. Can we really sell a simple cake set for 800 yen? Maybe I should make it cheaper...

Ah, no... I need to rest my mind for now. Need to space out, he told himself. *Space out...*

The class representative kept talking. “Since we’ve decided to do a cafe, we need to choose roles. Waitresses, waiters, people to make hot drinks, people to make posters... that kind of thing.”

She's forgetting accounts, Seiya thought, but of course, he didn't say it. Speaking up now would be like kicking a hornet's nest; the whole class would look at him and say, "Okay, Kanie-kun, you do the accounts." It was best to stay inconspicuous, like a flounder lying on the bottom of the ocean.

Still, the way the class representative was going about it just got under his skin. She clearly had no experience running a cafe and no idea what roles were needed. Since the teacher typically stepped out during homeroom, there was no one to correct her. The obvious roles like waiters and waitresses were chosen immediately, but they didn't even get to the more important things. She left role selection unfinished as she turned to things like planning the menu, how to put together uniforms, and other things that would be better off left until later. At this rate, it was clear that their rep's time was going to spill out past homeroom.

Seiya couldn't take it anymore. *I don't have time for this. There's a project meeting at the park at 4:00, and I don't want to be late...*

"...Ugh," Seiya sighed, and then wished he hadn't when the class representative noticed immediately.

"Kanie-kun. Is something the matter?" she asked.

"...No," he said reluctantly, "nothing in particular."

"It doesn't look that way to me," the class representative pushed. "I'd love to hear your opinion, if you have one."

"I don't." The whole class was looking at him. Kanie had always had a beautiful voice; just those few words were enough to get all eyes on him.

"Don't be like that. There's something on your mind, right?"

"....." *She's left me with no choice*, Kanie realized. If he didn't say something, he'd be straining the limits of what polite society would allow. "Ah... well, first... shouldn't you choose leaders for each section?"

"What do you mean?" the class representative asked.

"...You're just letting people call their own roles at random," he pointed out reluctantly. "When you open a restaurant like this... well, it's only for two days,

so I guess it doesn't matter, but this is basically what you do: You choose 'venue construction,' 'preparation of wares,' 'customer service'—which you've been discussing now—'publicity,' then 'accounts' and 'complaints.' Then, you need a manager to oversee it all and his or her assistant. That's eight people in total. Most places would double-up for cost reasons, but going by the book should be fine since it's just a culture festival." In a real restaurant, it wouldn't be unusual to have a single person playing all those roles at once. "Of course, each section has an important job," he went on. "Costumes for waitresses and such should be submitted by the 'customer service' section. Then 'accounts' should review everything carefully to make sure it's within budget, and... ah. Ahem." He could feel the eyes of everyone staring at him.

Seiya snapped out of his daze and cleared his throat. "Sorry, I'm just babbling. Forget what I said." He tried to go silent and withdraw again, but apparently, that wasn't going to be allowed.

"You're amazing, Kanie-kun!" someone said.

"Let's do that stuff he said!" someone else added.

Seiya wasn't sure, but he felt like he was being showered with praise. It wasn't a response he was used to receiving. *Still, at least this way, they'll pick the roles and get homeroom over with...* he was thinking.

But then, another classmate chimed in: "Hey, I know! Kanie-kun should be the manager!"

Crap, Seiya thought glumly. *This is why I always keep silent.* Out loud, he said, "No, I... I really can't. Um..."

"That's right," the class representative said excitedly. "If you know so much about it, you should run our cafe. You'll do it, right? You'll do it, right?!" Everyone was staring at him. So much pressure... it was hard for him to just brush it all aside.

But...! Seiya meant to turn them down flat. The idea was preposterous; he already had his hands full with the park. *Manage the school's culture festival? Ridiculous!*

Don't be stupid, he wanted to say. *I'm supposed to take precious time out of*

my day to help you people play restaurant? Do you know how many problems my suffering park still needs to have solved? I may get paid 850 yen an hour, but I deserve 5,000 at least! Even 10,000 would be a bargain! Are you gonna pay me that? You can't, can you?! Yet here you are, pushing me into the role! You idiots!

Of course, he couldn't say that. The school didn't know that he was acting manager at AmaBri; almost nobody knew. If his double life was as a member of a secret mercenary squad, he might at least feel a little bit cool about it, but he was just putting out fires for some lousy amusement park. It was utterly unimpressive, and he didn't want to talk about it.

All he had to do was say "no," coldly and bluntly, as he had done in every other aspect of his high school life. It's not as if they could think less of him; he'd conducted himself this way all this time. Everyone hated him as a result, and he was fine with that.

That's why even Seiya was surprised when he found himself saying: "I see. ...Okay, I'll do it."

They must have been expecting him to refuse, because they all seemed stunned by his response. Manager for a mock cafe at a culture festival... it shouldn't be that difficult a job. Carving out one hour per day for it should be all that was needed. He'd be all tied up during the festival days themselves, but he could probably work it out.

It was the change of heart that surprised him. *Ah, it should be fine*, was the last response he'd expected to give. He'd spent all these months reminding himself that the park had to come first. Yet somehow, he'd found himself thinking, *what's the harm? It'll work out, right? It's not like I'm getting three million people, anyway, and I came up with a better solution just the other day. If I can get it to work, then I won't need to scramble like before.* It was this feeling that had inspired him to say, "Okay, I'll do it."

"Huh? Kanie-kun? Are you serious?" the class representative asked, clearly not expecting Seiya to accept.

"Hmm..." Seiya thought it over again. *Was he serious? But... really, what was the big deal? Actually, it might prove to be a welcome change of pace.* "Yeah," he said. "I'll do it."

Only ten minutes later, the rumors had spread all throughout school, traveling by word of mouth, LINE, and other minor social media programs: the high-and-mighty perpetual loner, Kanie Seiya, was taking a job for the culture festival. And as manager, at that! The class 2-4 cafe would be something to watch. What had led to that change of heart? Did he have some kind of scheme going?

“I was in Kanie-kun’s class in first year. He never seemed like the team player type to me,” said a gossipy girl from class two to Sento Isuzu. They were standing around the shoe cabinets on the way out of school.

Isuzu couldn’t believe her ears. *Seiya-kun is doing what? Putting his park work on the back-burner to manage some culture festival’s trivial (sorry) fake cafe?*

“...What’s wrong, Isuzu-san?” the gossipy girl asked innocently.

“Oh. Nothing...” There was no surprise for her to hide; Isuzu’s face was always impassive.

Still, she couldn’t understand it—this was a crucial time for the park. The peak season for summer vacation was at an end, and things would get colder as they moved from autumn into winter. Colder weather meant fewer guests, which meant they’d need to work even harder if they wanted to get close to that unreasonable three million attendance number (although it seemed unreachable, even so).

And now he wanted to manage the culture festival? Isuzu found herself nervous and worried, more so than angry. She would have to question him about this later.

“Anyway, what have you got for our class project?” the gossipy girl chattered on. “The yakisoba museum... I can’t think of any original dishes.”

“Yakisoba museum” was the project that Isuzu’s class had decided on. The menu was all yakisoba, with an emphasis on presenting a wide variety—Osaka-style, Kyoto-style, Tokyo-style, *etc.* They also wanted to include some original yakisoba concepts, so the class would pitch their own during the next meeting.

“Really? I have, myself...” Isuzu had a plan: Whole cucumber yakisoba. It was a simple yakisoba with a whole cucumber nested on top. A brilliant idea, if she did say so herself. When thinking of what to offer your customers, you should

always think first about what you yourself would want. This one, then, would surely be well received. They might run out of stock, even. They'd need to secure a large number of cucumbers.

"Wow, you seem pretty confident," said her gossipy classmate. "Tell me what it is!"

"All right... But you'll keep it a secret, won't you?" Isuzu didn't want other people hearing her incredible original idea; someone might try to steal it. Once the whole cucumber yakisoba was a proven hit, she might even try adding it to AmaBri's snack bar menu.

"Ah... sure. I won't tell."

"Good. This is just between you and me, then..." Isuzu explained.

The girl's eyes went wide, her mouth dropped open, and her expression changed to an awkward smile. "Ah... er. That's... nice? But a whole cucumber is... it's a lot, isn't it?"

"Hardly," Isuzu scoffed. "One whole cucumber is, if anything, too little. But given the profit margins required, I determined that a single cucumber was most practical."

"I... I see."

"I'm sorry to repeat myself, but please don't tell anyone."

"R-Right. I won't tell anyone."

"If you ask me, it's the only menu item we'll need," Isuzu asserted confidently.

"Y-You... you think, huh?"

She noticed that her classmate's expression looked exactly like Muse's when the three stooges of AmaBri shared a dirty joke with her. *I wonder why...*

"Ah, anyway... look!" Her friend, forcing a change of subject, pointed to a bus on the road passing in front of the school gate. It was covered in a full-color advertisement; on its side was a large print of a woman in a bikini. The image was cut off from the chin up, so you couldn't see her face. It wasn't quite to the point of vulgarity, but it was an evocative image that emphasized her cleavage

and her waist. The Elementario girls could be seen in the background, playing around in swimsuits.

Beside the pinup-like image was a statement in easy-to-read bold font: “Autumn is for food! Autumn is for... pools?! The Dead Pool is open in autumn! Amagi Brilliant Park!” They’d erected a basic metallic frame and tent around the outdoor pool to convert it into an indoor one. It wouldn’t withstand the cold of mid-winter, but it could at least stay heated through November or so. That’s why they were advertising it as being ‘open for autumn.’ It was an idea pitched by the Splash Ocean cast, who always saw their numbers drop dramatically after summer pool season was over. Most amusement parks wouldn’t be capable of such a feat, but with the Mogute Clan working for them, AmaBri could get it done; Seiya had given the go-ahead immediately.

Of course, as head of the secretarial department, Isuzu knew about the bus. But this was her first time seeing it in the wild. She personally disliked the design, which had been prepared by the head of administration, Tricen... but she’d been forced to approve it. She couldn’t deny that it drew the eye, when it even drew hers.

“AmaBri’s doing an indoor pool,” said her friend. “We’ve been talking about going some time.”

“I see,” Isuzu said noncommittally. “That’s... good.”

“Want to come along?”

“I’m not sure. It will depend on my shifts at work. If I can go, I will.” That’s what Isuzu said, but she typically ended up bowing out every time. She felt bad for her classmates, but she really did mean it when she said she would go if she could. The fact was, she simply didn’t have a choice.

“Oh, sure. I’ll let you know when we’ve picked the day. But... that’s really something, huh?” She was gazing at the bikini-clad body plastered huge on the side of the bus. “I wonder if she’s foreign. She’s curvy, right? Totally stacked.”



“.....I see.”

“It’s honestly pretty gross,” Isuzu’s friend confided.

“.....” *Ah. Gross, is it?* Isuzu was quietly hurt, but she couldn’t say anything.

“The fact that they only show her from the neck down means she’s super ugly, I bet,” her friend said with a laugh.

“...Perhaps she is,” Isuzu agreed. *You’re talking to her from the neck up, you know*, she wanted to say. But of course, she couldn’t. The costs for a local bus advertisement were prohibitive, and the speedy indoor pool setup had run up quite a bill, too. That meant they didn’t have the money to hire a swimsuit model... which meant Isuzu had been required once more to ‘take one for the team.’ The swimsuit PV she’d shot months ago in March was still online (the hits had broken 300,000), and a few of the boys around school seemed to have realized it was her. She could feel them undressing her with their eyes from time to time. The next time something like this came up, she would turn them down flat. That’s right... next time.

But... when Seiya told her to do something, she found it impossible to refuse. Isuzu felt deeply indebted to him, and in addition, she also knew that what she was doing would benefit the park. Still, shouldn’t he show her a bit more consideration? As a secretary, of course. As a subordinate.

“Okay, ron. Let’s put our hands together...” Fairy of Music, Macaron, said to the girls of the idol(?) unit, Task Force ABC. “Follow after me, ron. ‘Book of Ezekiel, chapter 25, verse 17...’ Okay!”

“Um, Book of Ezekiel, chapter 25, verse 17...” Adachi Eiko, Bando Biino, and Chujo Shiina echoed him hesitantly.

“... ‘The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men,’ ron. Okay!”

“The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men!” The three girls chorused together.

The path of the righteous man is beset on all sides by the inequities of the selfish and the tyranny of evil men. Blessed is he who, in the name of charity and

good will, shepherds the weak through the valley of darkness, for he is truly his brother's keeper and the finder of lost children. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious anger those who attempt to poison and destroy my brothers.

“...‘And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee!’ Okay!”

“‘A-And you will know my name is the Lord when I lay my vengeance upon thee!’” It had sounded like a peaceful prayer at first, but it ended with fire and brimstone.

“Okay,” Macaron beamed. “We’ve got our pre-show prayer down pat. It’ll be a success for sure, ron.”

“It is a lovely idea,” Eiko said. “Although I have never heard that particular prayer before...”

“I don’t recognize it either, but I think it’s pretty cool!” Biino said.

“Isn’t that from *Pulp Fiction*? The scene before he shoots the drug dealer?” Shiina said.

“Oh, good eye, Shiina-chan! ...Wait, how old are you again, ron?”

“I-I’m fifteen... but, why are we practicing prayers, again?” she asked.

“I decided to take a page out of Michael Jackson’s book and say a prayer before we perform. But since I’m not a Christian, so I don’t know any Bible verses. So I decided to just pull one from a movie scene I like, ron.” The woolly sheep Macaron raised his head up proudly.

“That’s not much of an explanation...” Shiina grumbled.

“Incidentally, Maple Land is polytheistic, so we’re all pretty chill about that stuff, ron. The Goddess Libra tacitly approves too, ron.”

“Ahh.”

“Anyway, you guys have your big live show tonight, ron. Give it your best, ron!”

“Okay!” the girls cheered.

Task Force ABC had a live event scheduled for 7:00 tonight. It would be held at Macaron's Music Theater inside AmaBri, and the three girls would be the stars, while Macaron would be relegated to a side role.

Prior to this, they had mainly been doing drudge work at nursery schools, old folks' homes, shop events, and festivals—and even that was more like promotional activity than proper idol unit work. They'd hardly done any real stage performances; they mostly served as MCs to open the mascots' shows, so this was their first time serving as headliners.

"We're putting on this show because your fans demanded it, ron!"

"Yes! I'm honored!" Biino said.



“To put it more bluntly,” Macaron continued, “it’s because we had complaints about your adult fans sneaking into nursery schools and old folks homes to see you, ron!”

“That time at the nursery school when a grown man in short pants and a kid backpack wanted a handshake *was* pretty creepy...” Shiina said.

“Don’t be afraid! Most of your audience today will be people like that, ron!”

“Er, do you mean grown men in short pants and kid backpacks?” Eiko asked.

“Only in the most extreme cases, ron. Your normal adult fans will be much easier to get along with,” Macaron assured them. “I mean it! They’re just here to cheer on some under-the-radar talent. They’re a nice bunch of people, ron.”

“R-Really?”

“...I mean that they genuinely admire your work as idols! You need to treasure those people, ron!”

“Okay!”

“Good. See, look at that!” Macaron turned on the CRT screen installed backstage, where there was already a long queue snaking around the Music Theater to see Task Force ABC.

The main age range seemed to be late teens to mid-thirties, though there were quite a few in their 40s, as well. They were equipped with the special T-shirts and glow sticks the park sold, and were carrying tote bags with the girls’ faces printed on them. They were fully decked out and flushed with excitement.

“You can see they’re very different from the guests I usually pull in! But that’s a good thing! I want you to do your best to entertain them! Sing, dance, show your belly buttons and shake your moneymakers! Service is the name of the game! Got it? Got it? Got it, ron?!”

“Y-Yes, sir!” The three answered energetically.

“Okay! Then, one more time! Ezekiel, chapter 25, verse 17, ron! ‘The path of the righteous man is beset...’ Okay!”

“Back to that in the end, huh?” Shiina slumped over.

That was when Kanie Seiya arrived. “How’s everything going?” he wanted to know. As usual, he was in his blue acting manager’s uniform. He seemed surprisingly relaxed, even though they were about to have a big show.

“Kanie-san,” the three girls greeted him, straightening up in unison. It was a slightly over-the-top reaction to a boy in his second year of high school.

Meanwhile, Macaron gave a polite nod to Seiya, although his attitude was its usual haughty one. “What is it, Seiya-kun? We’re all nervous before our final rehearsal, ron. If you’ve come here to nitpick at us, I’d prefer you to save it until after, ron.”

“Actually, I just came to check in,” Seiya told them. “How are you all doing?”

“Perfect, ron. We’ve got five songs in total, and the choreography and everything is in the bag.”

“I see. That’s good to hear.” Seiya cleared his throat, looking from Eiko to Biino to Shiina. It wasn’t his usual scrutinizing gaze; he actually looked pretty relaxed. “Ahem. Ah... I know it’s a strange thing to ask, but...”

“...?” The girls waited.

“Are you sure you’re all right with this?” Seiya finally asked. “We kind of railroaded you into it, and you three... it’s not like you signed up to be entertainers. Giving a performance like this tonight could be the start of a lot of trouble for you...”

“Huh?” Macaron scowled. It wasn’t just him—all three of the girls were shocked by what they’d just heard, too. After everything that had happened, Seiya was the last person they’d expect to say something like that.

“There are going to be some real weirdos out there,” Seiya admitted. “Maybe even some stalker types. If you want, we could cancel it and gradually scale back your appearances...”

“Hey, now...” Macaron protested. He wanted to say, *After all you’ve put us through?*

But before he could, Chujo Shiina spoke up. “Pafter allyou thrut us boo?!” She stumbled over her words.

“Huh?” Seiya blinked in confusion.

“Yafter pall you thut us do?!” Shiina tried again.

“I can’t understand you.”

“You can do it, Shiina-chan,” Biino said encouragingly.

“Nice and slow, nice and slow!” Eiko agreed.

“S-Sorry...” Shiina’s face turned red. She took in a deep breath, and said timidly, “Um... after all you put us froo?!” She almost managed it.

Macaron, Eiko, and Biino gave her a round of applause.

“Th-Thankoo mery vuch... um, ahem.” Shiina straightened up and rubbed her chest. “...B-But I mean it, we’re... we’re working really hard! Of course, I wasn’t comfortable at first, but... now I like seeing our guests smile, and I like helping the park to do good business! So... so... it’s very discouraging to hear you say things like that!”

“Ron?” Even Macaron was surprised by her words. The three had been working very hard lately, it was true—but this was still just a temporary gig, and he’d assumed they were treating it as such.

“I’ll put my all into Task Force ABC!” Shiina declared. “I want to sell 100,000 CDs! I want to do a sold-out show at the Budokan! I want to tell a huge crowd of people, ‘Please come to AmaBri!’” There were tears in her eyes. Shiina, who had been so reluctant to sing that day in April when Moffle had pushed her into it, was now dead serious.

A mentor of Macaron’s had once told him, “Boy, keep this in mind: The stage has a way of growing a person up, ron.” Macaron recalled those words now, and nodded quietly to himself.

Seiya, meanwhile, just looked perplexed. “Are you serious?”

“Ah, well... I know we probably won’t sell 100,000 CDs or perform at the Budokan... but that really is the way I’m feeling, I guess. Right? Don’t you feel that way, Eiko-san, Biino-san?” Shiina looked at them for backup. Macaron assumed Eiko and Biino would react hesitantly and skirt the question, but his assumption was off the mark.

“I feel the same way that Shiina-san does,” Biino announced.

“So do I,” Eiko agreed enthusiastically. “Let’s do it!”

Each girl made her declaration and balled her hands into fists. Their gazes were determined.

“I see. Give it your best, then.” Seiya’s reaction, too, was unexpected. Normally, he’d say something like *You underestimate what it takes to be an entertainer!* or *Don’t think determination and desperation alone will get you far!* But instead, all he’d said was, “give it your best.” The comment wasn’t dismissive, exactly, but something about it felt wrong, coming out of the Seiya that Macaron had known.

There was nothing... greasy about it, you might say. It had none of the sweaty earnestness, none of the seething desperation that he’d felt from Seiya in the past. *Is he tired?* the sheep mascot wondered. Yes, that must be it. But even so, it was a strange way to behave...

“Macaron,” Seiya said, “what is it?”

“Ron? Ah, nothing...”



“Okay,” Seiya agreed easily. “Anyway, I can tell you’re passionate about it. I’m putting my hopes on you!”

“Okay!!!” The three girls answered energetically.

“Sorry for the interruption. As you were,” Seiya said, before walking away.

Macaron watched him carefully from around a backstage corner until he was finally out of sight. “Okay! Let’s kick this up a notch!” he cheered. “They’re gonna see a new trio starting today!”

“Y-Yesh! Det’s boo our lest (let’s do our best),” Shiina said.

“I’m sure it will be so much fun!” the others agreed.

Eiko, Biino, and Shiina drew close to each other and struck a motivational pose. They didn’t seem to have noticed the changes in Seiya at all.

“Macaron-san?”

“Ron? Ah... right! Anyway, let’s do our best, ron! Now, back to practice! Book of Ezekiel, chapter 25, verse 17! ‘The path of the righteous man is beset...’”

“This again?”

The three girls slumped over as Macaron began his energetic recital.

It wasn’t just Macaron, but people all over the cast who got in contact with Isuzu about there being “something odd about Seiya.” Moffle did it, Tiramii did it. Head of administration Tricen did it, head of food Nick did it, as did head of maintenance Wrenchy-kun...

“Has Seiya seemed a little tired lately, fumo?” they said.

“Kanie-kun’s been yelling at me less lately, mii... I almost feel a little neglected, mii...” they said.

“He hasn’t rebuked me at all. I find myself hunching over with fear...” they said.

The complaints came over LINE, through email, and in person.

Are our employees so masochistic that they want Kanie-kun’s abuse? Isuzu found herself wondering. But she couldn’t really blame them; she felt the same

way. The one ray of hope she found was that the only people unsettled by Seiya's recent behavior were solely the real cast in leadership positions; the rank-and-file and part-timers didn't know him well enough to be particularly flustered by it. But that, too, was probably just a matter of time, and she worried that morale all over the park might eventually come to suffer.

After seeing through the Task Force ABC concert, Isuzu returned to the general affairs building. When she arrived in the acting manager's office, she found Seiya working on his PC. He must not have gone to the show.

"Sento," he said by way of greeting. "How'd the ABC show go?"

"It was a sold out crowd," she told him. "The fans were extremely pleased, and we sold nearly all of their merchandise."

"We didn't produce much to begin with, so that's not too surprising."

"I see..." She sat down at her desk and cast a glimpse at Seiya. It was quite dark outside by now, and she could see his computer screen reflected in the window behind him. She had assumed he was doing paperwork, but she was wrong. It was a simple card game: Freecell. Seiya, playing Freecell during work? Isuzu couldn't believe her eyes. The ever-diligent Kanie Seiya, skipping out on work to play Freecell?!

While Isuzu sat there in bewilderment, he continued moving his mouse, *click, click, click*. He snapped his tongue almost inaudibly. He must have hit a wall and been forced to restart. "Hey, Sento..." he said.

"Y-Yes?"

"You know the saying, 'all affairs are like Saio's horse'?"

"Yes. It's a mortal saying," she replied. "It means that bad things can have good results in the long run... and vice-versa."

"That's right," he agreed amiably. "Lately, I feel like I understand what that means."

Because he's playing Freecell? Isuzu wondered. She sometimes got that feeling when playing that game. There was a rush of endorphins that came when you got past a difficult situation—she understood it well. She had once

been rather addicted to it herself, and after determining it to be a toxic, dangerous piece of software, she had deleted it from her computer.

“And?” she questioned.

“Well... that impossible three million requirement... I’ve started thinking it might be a good thing, in the long run,” he said thoughtfully. “That’s all.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Well... I guess it doesn’t really matter,” Seiya said, letting out a small yawn.

“...I must ask you a question, Seiya-kun,” Isuzu finally said. “Someone at school told me that you volunteered to manage your class’s cafe at the culture festival.”

“I didn’t volunteer. I reluctantly agreed,” Seiya clarified. “...What, are people talking?”

“Yes. That’s how rare it is for you to become aggressively involved with school activities.”

“Ah, I guess it is.”

“Your duties as acting manager are trying enough as it is,” she told him. “Are you certain that you can handle this?”

“I don’t know. I figure I can work it out, though.”

“How can you say that?” she burst out.

Seiya kept clicking his mouse. “Don’t worry. If any conflicts arise, this place will always take priority.” By ‘this place,’ he of course meant AmaBri.

“But then what about the culture festival?” she questioned.

“It’s not like my reputation can suffer any more. Everyone hates me already. But it’s just a mock cafe for two days, right? I can polish that off in a few spare hours.” Seiya’s nonchalant tone filled Isuzu with an annoyance she found hard to describe.

“I suppose that’s true,” she said. “But... in that case, why did you agree to be their manager?”

“I wanted to finish up homeroom and leave,” Seiya explained.

“Really? That’s the only reason?”

“Of course it is... what’s with you today, anyway? What are you so worried about?”

“You’re playing Freecell,” she pointed out. “I can see it.”

“Hmm...”

“I’m worried because your behavior is unusual.”

“I’m just trying to change things up a little.” Seiya closed the card game window and let out a sigh.

“I don’t mind that, but—” Just then, the phone at Isuzu’s desk rang. It was an outside number; she answered it immediately. “Yes? Maple Enterprise, secretarial department, Sento speaking.” Isuzu was the only member of that ‘department,’ of course. But she always introduced herself this way, as a matter of appearances.

“I’m sorry to bother you so late at night. I’m Handa from Kagaya Real Estate. Could you put me through to Kanie-sama, please?” It was an unfamiliar woman’s voice. She sounded energetic, but not young; she was probably over 40 years old.

“Yes. Handa-sama, you said? Just a moment.” She pressed the hold button and turned to Seiya. “It’s someone called Handa from Kagaya Real Estate. Do you know her?”

“Ah... yeah. Put her through.” Seiya seemed a little flustered. He seemed to think deeply for a moment, then picked up the receiver. “Kanie here. Yes... no, I don’t mind at all. My cell number... ah, I see. I’m sorry.”

Isuzu didn’t know what the woman was saying. She assumed that this (probably older) woman named Handa was apologizing for calling him at work instead of on his smartphone. In other words, Seiya had been trying to get in contact with this person from Kagaya Real Estate without Isuzu, his secretary, finding out about it. *What’s going on here?* she wondered. As if sensing Isuzu’s dissatisfied gaze, Seiya turned his back on her while he continued his

conversation. *Kagaya Real Estate*... it was a real estate company, obviously. It sounded familiar, but she didn't think AmaBri had any ongoing deals with them.

"...Yes. Hmm, I see... there? Yes... that might possibly work. Ah... yes... I understand... then could I come and have a look at the site? How about tomorrow? ...Yes. Tomorrow at 1:00, then. Thank you very much. Goodbye." Seiya hung up the receiver.

They were engulfed by that peculiar silence unique to a small office after a phone call ended. It was Isuzu who broke it first. "Seiya-kun? Was that—"

"Can we save the interrogation for later?" Seiya asked, holding up his hand. "I didn't tell you because I'm still not committed. I didn't know if the property was there or not."

"Property? What do you mean?" Isuzu wanted to know.

"I'll... explain tomorrow. Don't ask me anything today," Seiya ordered. "I haven't even sorted out all my own thoughts on it."

"But..."

"Just keep your schedule open tomorrow. We can meet up at 11 AM at Inabazutsumi Station, and then we'll have a private viewing."

"A private viewing? What do you..."

"Mum's the word, okay?" He turned off his computer, then swiftly started packing up to go home.

"Seiya-kun," Isuzu protested, "I don't understand."

"Just don't tell anyone. Not even Latifah. Tomorrow at Inabazutsumi Station, 11 AM. Don't be late, okay?" he told her shortly, and then headed off on his own.

2: EXODUS

“Don’t ask me anything.” “Don’t tell anyone.” Isuzu was loyal enough that when Seiya told her to keep quiet, she had no choice but to obey. Still, she couldn’t help but spend the night tossing and turning and racking her brain.

She spent a sleepless time alone in the girl’s dorm, her anxious thoughts racing along three general lines:

Number one... Kanie Seiya was dealing with family problems, and was finally making plans to move out of the apartment he shared with his aunt, Kyubu Aisu. The real estate company had called to tell him about an appropriate property.

It was also possible he meant to get a place to live with Isuzu. Though that would be quite sudden, it was the only reason she could think of for why he would possibly want to bring her. “Look, it has a nice big bathroom. We can take baths together. We can start our life together here, right, Sento?” What would she do if he took her in his arms and whispered that to her? But if... if... if he were to make that offer to her, what would become of her oath to the princess?

No, that couldn’t be it. But still... but still...

Number two... Could it be that Kanie Seiya liked older women? That woman on the phone sounded over 40, and she could even be as old as 60. Was their phone exchange hiding some charged yet subtle eroticism that a young girl like her couldn’t comprehend? It wouldn’t be strange for an adult couple, trying to hide their relationship, to put on such an act. It wouldn’t be strange at all.

But in that case, why would he take Isuzu to see his love nest with an older woman? Was it a roundabout way of saying “Get a clue. I’m living with this older woman; give up on me,” or something like that? But it wasn’t as if they had that kind of relationship to begin with. It would be a strange thing to say to someone who was still merely your secretary. But still... but still...

Number three... What if Seiya was actually dating some woman in the park, and he was looking for a place to live with her? What if it was Muse?! No

offense to Muse, of course. It was just hypothetical. Purely hypothetical. And then, and then... what if they didn't want to bear the burden of rent by themselves, and wanted to come up with some... scheme, to pay for it using the park's finances? That might explain why he wanted his secretary along...

But wait. For matters of funding, it would make more sense to bring the head of the financial department, Ashe. She was the person who held the purse strings in the park, and she *definitely* wouldn't allow funds to be used in that way. Unless... Ashe? Was Ashe the other woman? If he was planning to live with Ashe, wouldn't that explain everything he'd said? Of course. Ashe, was it?

Apart from Isuzu, the woman Kanie Seiya spent the most time with wasn't Latifah, but Ashe. She was an elite former minister of Schubert, a dark elf-type with blonde hair and copper skin. She was always very businesslike, and wore tight-fitting suits that showed off her nice curves. Ashe was an incredibly appealing woman, and Isuzu knew that she couldn't compete. But still... but still...

Isuzu ended up spending a sleepless night thanks to these thoughts. She staggered her way through the next morning, arrived at Amagi City's Inabazutsumi Station at 11:00, and found Seiya standing there in his usual clothes: Jeans from UNIQLO, a parka from The Gap, and cheap sneakers.

Meanwhile, Isuzu had gone all-out, wearing a jersey-knit top with a dropped neckline (emphasizing her chest), a frilly cardigan (emphasizing her femininity), and a pleated skirt with a flower pattern (emphasizing her legs). "So? Where are we going?" Isuzu asked, fighting off her sleepiness and getting herself together. If it was any of her three possibilities, it couldn't be too far away from Amagi City.



“You look pretty decked out,” Seiya observed. “Where did you think we were going?”

“...?”

“We’re not heading into the city,” he clarified. “It’s the suburbs... well, actually, more like the country.”

“What do you mean?” Isuzu asked.

“We’re going to Sanami Lake,” he told her. “Didn’t I mention that?”

He hadn’t. He hadn’t said anything. Sanami Lake was in the mountains, far into Western Tokyo, on the other side of Mt. Takao. It was just on the border, in Kanagawa Prefecture. It was the kind of place that was bustling with tourists on the weekends, but nearly empty on weekdays. What would be the point of renting an apartment out in the sticks? (Apologies, but “the sticks” was the only way to put it).

“That’s two hours from here,” she said incredulously.

“More like an hour and change,” he said. “Let’s get on the train.”

“Could you explain first?”

“I’ll explain on the way.”

“.....” With no other choice, Isuzu followed after Seiya.

They got on the JR Nanbu Line from Inabazutsumi Station, heading towards Tachikawa. The Nanbu Line was shaky and loud. It was known locally as the “gambling train.” There were lots of horse tracks and cycle race tracks along the line, so the Sunday passengers naturally tended towards that disposition. They were surrounded by middle-aged men glaring death at horseracing newspapers, which made talking awkward.

“Let’s see, where to start...” Seiya finally said after they changed to the Chuo Line in Tachikawa. “Do you know anything about Kagawa Real Estate?”

“A little bit. I’ve heard the name, at least,” Isuzu said, but the truth was, she had looked them up last night. There wasn’t much of use on their home page, but she’d managed to figure out that they didn’t really do residences, and

generally handled land sales for corporations instead. They apparently handled the accounts of several *ager*—these were amusement parks, managed by magical realms—inside Japan.

“I’ve had them secretly searching for property over the last few weeks,” Seiya told her. “This isn’t something I can just casually tell people about.”

“I had no idea,” said Isuzu, feeling bewildered.

“Needs of the situation. I didn’t want anyone to know.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but it seems awfully far away,” she pointed out.

“What?”

“If you’re renting an apartment, Sanami Lake seems too far away,” Isuzu said, trying hard to sound unconcerned.

Seiya’s brow furrowed. “Apartment? What are you talking about?”

“It’s not an apartment? A house, then?” Was he trying to get a large estate with a lot of land in the country where rent was cheap? In the age they lived in, she’d heard you could get a pretty nice summer house for only a few million yen: three bedrooms, with a yard and a hot spring.

A hot spring! Of course! *He wants to enjoy a hot spring with someone? I don’t know who, but he must know how much I like hot baths. And if he’s telling me about all of this... is he testing me? Sanami Lake is famous for its secluded hot springs. Maybe he’s trying to see if the mention of a villa there would make me happy? Maybe? Yes. It would be a lie to say I have no interest at all in Sanami Lake hot springs. He must be—* “Ah, just to warn you, we’re not going to the Sanami Lake hot springs,” Seiya said bluntly.

Isuzu straightened up in shock, feeling as if he’d read her mind. “Hot springs? What do you mean?”

“I’m not really sure, but I know you,” he told her. “I assumed you were thinking I wanted to rent a house with a hot spring bath, or something.”

“Ridiculous. I wasn’t thinking of hot springs at all,” Isuzu lied, brazenly.

“Really? All right,” Seiya said with genuine indifference. “Anyway, I was

looking for property. Not an apartment or a house—land.”

“Land?”

“Land,” he said firmly. “I’m looking for a big plot of land.”

“A big plot... how big?” Isuzu wanted to know.

“Let’s see... around 500,000 square meters, if I can get it.”

“But that’s...” A word flashed suddenly into the back of Isuzu’s mind. *EXODUS*. That was the word she’d seen typed out on Seiya’s computer screen after he passed out from exhaustion. Exodus—a great movement out of Egypt. Migration. And the 500,000 square meters Seiya mentioned was the same area as Amagi.

What did it mean? That was obvious; he was going to move the park. Seiya was going to move the entire park out of Amagi City to somewhere else.

“I see you’ve caught my meaning,” Seiya said, with tremendous nonchalance, despite the seriousness of the situation. “This is why I was searching in secret. Can you imagine what would happen if word got out?”

“Are you serious about it?” she asked.

“I haven’t made up my mind for sure yet,” he admitted. “But I’m exploring it pretty seriously.”

“Why on earth—”

“Why do you *think*? There’s no way we’re getting three million people by the end of the year.” It was September now. Their best period for bringing in customers, summer vacation, was already over. It was only going to get colder from here on out. They had a lot of months left, but traffic in January and February was bound to be low; attendance during this time was typically so bad that most amusement parks could close up entirely on weekdays.

Their current attendance was 1.2 million. They’d beaten their total attendance from the past year to a degree that could almost be called a miracle. But their final attendance would still likely fall somewhere around the two million mark. No matter how optimistic your calculations, the shortfall was inescapable; there was no gutsy move, no effort from the cast that would be

meaningful enough to change it.

The numbers had come clear around last month; that was why he'd tried for the bidding war between Digimaland and Cosmic Studios. But then he'd thrown that out the window, and in the rudest way possible. Isuzu was relieved to see those negotiations fall apart, but they still hadn't solved the three million attendance problem, and neither of those two conglomerates would offer aid to AmaBri ever again. Even so, this was Seiya they were talking about—she'd known that he must have some trick up his sleeve. So this was it. "You're running away?" she asked.

"That's right," Seiya said with a self-deprecating smile. "The only reason we have to deal with that absurd three million requirement is because we're clinging to Amagi City. It's like a landlord putting unreasonable demands on his tenants. At some point, you just have to move out."

"Even so... this isn't exactly like changing apartments," Isuzu pointed out.

"I've spent a lot of time since then reading over various contracts," Seiya said. "I think it's possible."

"But what about the money?"

"We're not rolling in it, but I think we'll be fine. We're assured almost two million in attendance already, so we should have enough to pay off both Amagi Development and the city," Seiya explained. "The money we spent on the renovations this year can be paid off over two years with the money we make from the sale of the land and facilities. Plus, interest is ultra-low right now. I did a rough estimate; have a look. See?" Seiya tore a page from his notebook and held it out to Isuzu.

Isuzu spent about a minute reading it thoroughly. They were just rough calculations, but under this plan, they probably could wring out enough money for their so-called 'exodus.'

"The cost of land around Sanami Lake is about one third of Amagi City's," Seiya said. "It's still a lot of acreage, so it won't be cheap, for sure... but it seems like a realistic option, right?"

"Realistic? Hardly." Isuzu replied, and furrowed her brow. "What about the

cast? Most of them live in or near Amagi City, don't they? You think they'll all happily move out to the middle of nowhere?"

"It's not the middle of nowhere. And it's only about an hour by train."

"But you still expect everyone to just go along with it? The veteran cast will rebel, and the young people will quit rather than make the commute."

"Then we'll make it work with whoever's left," Seiya said bluntly. "Besides, it's better than losing the park entirely."

"Well... I suppose that's true, but..." Isuzu had no alternate plan. Of course she didn't. Seiya had spent six months racking his brains, and this was the best he'd come up with.

"There are plenty of issues to deal with, of course," he went on. "Backlash from the employees, like you said; what to do about the attractions; the inevitable negotiations with Maple Land when we move; etc, etc..."

"Most importantly, how will we bring in guests?" she asked. "Our regulars won't follow us on a move this far away."

"That's what makes location so crucial," he told her. "AmaBri's been lucky in that regard." AmaBri really did have a good location: thirty minutes from Shinjuku by train, then ten minutes by bus. There were only two or three other amusement parks so accessible from the city. "Besides, a drop in attendance won't be fatal anyway. We'll be able to take it easy, coasting along on decent numbers and acceptable profits. We can make our target, say... 500,000 a year? That should be more than enough to keep us in the black." He sounded so relaxed. There was no desperation, no tension or strain, in his voice.

Isuzu finally realized why Seiya had been acting so strangely lately. "I see..." she murmured.

"Does that upset you?" he asked.

"Well..." It didn't upset her at all. Isuzu hated the idea of placing any more burden or worry on Seiya. It's not as if he was at fault for any of their problems. *If it makes things easier on you, I'm glad*—she was about to say, but then swallowed the words down. Instead, she said with calm—with forced calm: "I just see why you've been so low-energy lately. That's all."

“Hm...”

“When I look more closely, your jaw is slackened,” she mused. “Your gaze is more slovenly. Humans fall from grace so easily...”

“What the heck? I’m talking about securing a future for the park! Besides, I look at myself in the mirror every morning, and I’m still as handsome as ever! You need your eyes checked if you think I’m slacking at all!” Seiya said, openly annoyed.

Seeing that he was still capable of arrogance gave Isuzu a measure of relief. “Your self-confidence is the one thing I’ve always admired about you.”

“Hmph.” Seiya let out a snort, and gazed out the train window unhappily. “But, it’s too bad...”

“...?” she waited for him to finish his statement.

“Self-confidence isn’t worth a damn,” he finally said.

The train kept on moving. The houses visible outside the windows grew sparser and sparser, and mountains stretched out as far as the eye could see. Western Tokyo was a mountainous region, so this was to be expected.

Handa-san from Kagaya Real Estate met them right outside the JR Sanami Lake Station ticket gate. She was a flashy dresser. She was in her 40s, as expected, but her skirt was very short. She was very tanned and her exposed legs were clearly well-muscled. Her short brown hair seemed bleached by the sun.

“Do you do triathlons in your spare time?” Seiya asked after a brief greeting, and Handa-san’s eyes lit up.

“How’d you know? Have we crossed paths at a meet somewhere?” she boomed. When Isuzu had first spoken to her, she’d assumed the loudness of her voice was an issue of phone volume. Apparently, she’d been wrong.

“No, I don’t really play sports...” Seiya admitted.

“You don’t?! Then how did you know?! What a mystery! Ah ha ha! My son’s friends all say the same thing! It’s a mystery! It’s a mystery, all right!” The area around the station was quiet, and they could probably hear her from over 100

meters away. “Now, let’s hit the property! My car is parked right over there! Look, there! There!” Handa-san strode off.

“She’s like a gym teacher... and she seems a little crazy...”

“She’s very unreserved, though. I rather like her.”

While Isuzu and Seiya whispered to each other, Handa-san opened the door of a Daihatsu kei-car parked on the shoulder, and waved them over with a shout. “Hey! Come on, come on! Don’t wait too long, or we’ll lose the light! Ahaha! Ahaha!”

What does this old woman think is so funny? Is she on drugs? Seiya suddenly felt reluctant to get into any car she was driving.

“Pretty small car, right? Ahaha! Go on, get in!” she urged. “You know where the seatbelts are?!”

“Ah, yes...”

“I’ve got travel sickness medicine! You need some? You want some?”

“Ah, no thank you...”

“You might regret it later! Go on, just take some! I won’t hold it against you!”

“No, I really... don’t need it.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, if you insist! Let me know if you start feeling nauseous! Don’t be a hero, okay? Okay?! Ahaha!”

“Ahh... is the property very far?” he wanted to know.

“Nooooope! Just twenty minutes by car! Ahaha!”

“I... I see...” Then don’t try to push travel sickness medicine on me... it makes no sense.

Handa-san kept driving, unaware of how annoyed Seiya was feeling.

The city around Sanami Lake was quiet. The weather was clear today, and the September weather was still hot and muggy. They could see the large lake spanning their right, where blinding sunlight glinted off the water.

They were going down a highway along the slope of the mountain, so now

and then, they could hear the roar of another engine. They also saw large signs proclaim things like “Sanami Lake Camping Land: 3 km” and such.

Sanami Lake Camping Land was the only noteworthy amusement park near Sanami Lake City, an outdoor-style resort facility that shared funds with Highlander Fujimi, the more hardcore amusement park further west at the foot of Mt. Fuji.

“Are you worried about Camping Land?! Ahaha!” Handa-san said. “It’s been doing very well lately! Ahaha! Not many people there today, but it’s usually brimming over with guests!”

“Yes. I do hear that Camping Land does very well...” Seiya responded, forcing himself to sound indifferent. It would be a lie to say he wasn’t concerned about Camping Land. They were heading to a 33-hectare plot several mountains away from it, which hosted the ruins of another amusement park that had closed a long time ago. It was close enough that the rivalry might prove troublesome if AmaBri moved here.

“The property we’re going to see... there was talk about turning it into a golf course! But the buyers just never seem to bite! Ahaha!” Handa-san said, as if she found it very funny. Seiya and Isuzu had no idea what was so funny about a golf course not finding a buyer.

There was already an amusement park with a well-established customer base nearby. Would moving AmaBri here cause friction? Seiya didn’t agree; it was the opposite. Sanami Lake was quite a ways away from Tokyo, so having another amusement park here would be huge.

It was a synergy thing: if customers were coming for an overnight stay, most didn’t want to spend their second day at the same park. It would be more fun to go to places with different concepts on different days. That’s what he was banking on, but... *It looks pretty rusty...* Seiya thought. It was his impression, not of Camping Land, but of the region as a whole.

They’d caught sight of two abandoned structures on the way here: One was a closed-down bowling alley; the windows were all broken, and there was graffiti on the walls. It was right next to the main road, yet it looked like it had been abandoned for years.

The other was a closed love hotel. It was a beautiful building, ten stories tall, that looked out on the lakefront, but it also seemed to have been neglected for a long time. With its castle-like outer appearance, it now resembled a sort of haunted house. It was probably an exciting location for urban explorers, at least.

There'd been something off about the station they'd come out of, too. There were just a few souvenir shops and eateries around the small taxi roundabout, and he wasn't even sure if they were in business or not. Lots of storefronts with closed shutters. The public park in front of the station (called "Excitement Park") was empty. Unshapely fish statues sat in a fountain dirty with limescale, from which water came out in fits and starts. There was no energy here, no passion. Sanami Lake hung heavy with that distinct smell of "obsolete tourist trap" that you found here and there around Japan.

"What do you think, Seiya-kun?" Isuzu must have been feeling the same thing. He wasn't going to say it in front of Handa-san, but she had probably read it off his expression.

"Hmm... well. I think it's all right." That wasn't how Seiya felt at all, but he still said it.

The prefectural road continued to snake through the mountain. It was so narrow that a large bus coming the other way might result in a standstill. "Are you certain there's an appropriate property in the area?" Isuzu asked nervously.

"Yeah! We're almost there! Ahaha! ...Look, there it is!" Visible across the upcoming T-intersection, obscured by trees, they could see a sign covered in ivy. "That's the property I want to show you! The former Sanami Amusement Park!"

All Seiya could make out on the grimy sign was 'Welcome to Sanami Amusement Park.' "It's been closed... twenty years now, right? Has it been abandoned this whole time?"

"Yes!" Handa-san told them cheerily. "Why do you ask?!"

"Well... if the old facilities are still around, it will cost money to have them removed. We might need to do a geotechnical investigation, too," Seiya pointed out. "Is that something we can negotiate?"

“You bet it is! Okay, going in!”

Does she really know that, though? Seiya wondered, growing more and more nervous. This appeared to be a private road, but they eventually arrived at a rusty gate.

“Hang on just a minute!” said Handa-san, getting out of the car and going to open the gate.

“Sanami Amusement Park... I’ve never heard of it,” Isuzu said.

“It closed a long time ago,” Seiya told her. “Its active period was before the Internet took off, too, so you’d be unlikely to find it just with an online search. It’s really only known among urban explorers.” The former Sanami Amusement Park was full of creepy things like the sign they’d seen earlier, this gate, and the statues of various mascots left to the elements along the road on the way in. It would be a great place for a test of courage.

Isuzu was a little nervous, too. Like Seiya, she didn’t have much spiritual sensitivity (despite being a native of a magical realm), but still, she felt an unsettling air hanging over this place. “Are you certain this is all right?” she questioned.

“That’s what we came to find out,” he told her. “If it’s not, we’ll find another site.”

“So you haven’t made up your mind yet?”

“I’m enthusiastic, but I haven’t decided.”

“.....” Isuzu had nothing to say to that statement.

Handa-san didn’t come back immediately. She dithered around in front of the gate, looking thoughtful. Just as Seiya and Isuzu began to wonder what was going on, she opened just one half of the gate, then returned to the car.

“What’s the matter?” Seiya asked.

“Nothing! It was already unlocked, that’s all!”

“What?”

“Oh, you see this a lot!” she said reassuringly. “Some local kids or urban

explorers just barge on in! The nerve of those people, I tell you!”

“Is someone in there now?” Seiya was a little unsettled, but Handa-san just waved at him in an exaggerated fashion.

“No, no! I’m sure it’s fine! The people who own it send someone through once a month. I’m sure they came in a few weeks ago and forgot to lock up after, that’s all!”

“Ah-hah...” It seemed plausible enough, but... Seiya didn’t want to stumble upon the body of someone who had infiltrated the park on a lark and fallen to their deaths. The weather was still warm; any corpse left to rot would probably be pretty rank right now.

“If anything happens, just leave it to me! I’m a really fast runner!” Handa-san boasted. “I’ll dash off at top speed to call for help! Ahaha!”

In other words, you’re going to run away? he thought pointedly.

3: In the Ruins

Though abandoned, most of the old Sanami Amusement Park's structures were still intact: Roller coasters, merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels, teacups... nearly all of it was where it had always been. Everything was dirty with rust and limescale, and creaked unsettlingly every time the wind blew past; weeds grew wild and high through cracks in the pavement. Nearby, several of the cars of the Ferris wheel had lost their linchpins from aging and seemed like they might crash to the ground any second. It looked like Handa-san was right, in that young locals slipped in every now and then; most of the buildings were tagged with graffiti, and there wasn't an unbroken window in sight. AmaBri had been in bad shape when Seiya first visited it last March, but it was nothing compared to this.

"It's 330,000 square meters... that's about two-thirds of AmaBri's current area," Isuzu said, while reading through the documents Handa-san had given her. The two of them were standing in the park's entry plaza, wearing their borrowed yellow safety helmets. Handa-san had said she'd be waiting near the entrance; she didn't know enough about the property to give them an in-depth tour. "Not very big..." Sento muttered.

"We're *too* big at the moment," Seiya told her. "And it's about right for a place in the mountains."

"It's hilly as well," Isuzu argued back. "It might be hard for children and the elderly to get around."

"Well... we can compensate with elevators and escalators. Universal design is important anyway, nowadays."

"The demolition will be costly. I would estimate one billion yen to remove the existing structures."

"It would be, normally," Seiya agreed. "But having the Mogute Clan on our side will give us more breathing room."

"And then there's the poor access... construction will be challenging," Isuzu put in, "given the narrowness of the road leading here. Bringing in the heavy

machinery we need, alone, will be a significant feat.”

“What’s with you? Don’t you have anything positive to say?” Seiya said in annoyance.

Isuzu furrowed her brow slightly. “I’m merely giving you the facts. That *is* my job.”

“Hmph.”

“Even so...” Isuzu looked out over the ruins. “It’s a depressing sight, isn’t it? I feel like I’m seeing one possible future for AmaBri...”

“Of course you do,” Seiya grumbled. “This is completely how it would have ended up if I hadn’t arrived. You could show a little gratitude...”

“I’m always stunned by the confidence it must take for you to say such things...” she mused.

“Come on, let’s look around.” Seiya ignored Isuzu’s barbs and began to walk towards the hall of mirrors just ahead, while adjusting the safety helmet he’d borrowed from Handa-san. Of course, the mirrors out front were all broken, and the structure was so covered in ivy and graffiti that it was hard to tell where the original entrance even was.

“It looks dangerous,” Isuzu cautioned him. “Like the whole building might come down at any minute.”

“Wait outside if you like, then,” Seiya retorted.

“I think that I will. You’ll need someone to inform the others when you’re mortally injured.”

“.....” He had no reply to that one. Couldn’t she show concern like a normal person? That said, they were only here to examine the grounds; he didn’t actually have to paw through the ruins themselves. Still, Seiya wanted to get a feel for how badly off the buildings were, and to estimate how much the removal might cost.

He was approaching the hall of mirrors, peering in, when he caught sight of a feral cat inside. “There’s a cat in there,” he remarked.

“A cat?” Isuzu questioned.

“Well, it looked like a cat, anyway...” He’d only seen it for a second; some kind of small, black-and-white animal that had slipped through the corridor just ahead of him. It was so sudden that he couldn’t be sure, but it had looked like a cat to Seiya, at least.

“A feral cat colony might prove troublesome,” she observed.

“Why?”

“We’d have to drive them out before we could demolish the buildings, wouldn’t we?”

“It’s not that big a deal. We can just lure them out with cat food or something.”

“Seiya-kun,” Isuzu protested again, “this isn’t safe.”

“Actually, it’s surprisingly intact...” he told her. Despite its outer appearance, conditions inside the hall of mirrors weren’t that bad. There were a few broken mirrors, and Seiya saw a lot of graffiti, but that was the worst of it. He proceeded down a path and turned a corner, where he spotted the cat in a T-intersection ahead. It was too dark for him to see it clearly.

Is that... really a cat? he wondered. Maybe not. It was too round to be a cat, and its legs and tail were too stubby. What was it, then? A puppy? A piglet? The animal disappeared around the corner. “Piglet” seemed like the best guess, but it was hard to imagine wild hogs in a place like this...

“Seiya-kun?” Isuzu called after him.

“I’m just going to have a look,” he called back. Seiya followed the small animal, taking several more turns. He was surrounded by mirrors, by countless Seiyas in safety helmets. He couldn’t tell where the openings were; there were no lights, thanks to the building’s abandoned state.

All right, maybe this was a little dangerous... he thought uneasily. Hands outstretched to keep from banging into any mirrors, he fumbled his way forward and proceeded carefully.

“Seiya-kun? Where are you?” Isuzu asked from afar.

“Just shut up and wait outside!” he yelled.

“Seiya-ku—” Her voice seemed to get further away. It was probably because of the winding pathways. He didn’t think Isuzu would get hurt, but he was still a little worried.

Seiya came out into a faintly lit passageway. The exit was probably close. After a little more uncertain walking, he found the little creature again. It wasn’t a piglet; it was a tapir.

Black and white fur; short and stout body; long, dangling snout—a tapir.

“A tapir? What’s... a tapir doing here?” he asked. Had the old Sanami Amusement Park been home to some kind of miniature zoo? He’d seen no suggestion of that on the guide sign at the entrance...

“Oink,” the tapir said.

Seiya wasn’t aware that tapirs made noises like pigs, but the oink seemed to carry a sense of “follow me.” He wasn’t exactly happy being at the beck-and-call of a tapir, but his curiosity won out. Keeping his guard high, Seiya followed after it.

He came out of the hall of mirrors, on what seemed to be the other side of the building. Ahead of him, a narrow path traced a leisurely curve.

“Oink.” The tapir took off running. Seiya hesitated, then looked back. He was worried about Sento.

“Sento! I’m going to go on a little further!” he shouted. “Just stay where you are!” The ruins were so quiet, she could probably still hear him if he shouted. But no reply came. “Hey! Sento?!” he tried again.

“Oink...” The tapir was leaving. If he waited too long, he’d lose sight of it.

“Ah! ...Just stay there, okay, Sento?!” Still no response. He was sure she must have heard him, though...

Seiya quickly followed the tapir. He ran down the overgrown path and turned several corners.

“Oink,” he heard it say again, but he couldn’t see it. Its cries grew more and distant as he ran, and eventually, Seiya lost sight of the tapir.

The hill’s slope had put the hall of mirrors out of his sight by now; he couldn’t

even tell which direction it was in. He was surrounded by overgrown vegetation and buildings deteriorated beyond recognition. The words on the signs were so faded by decades left to the elements that they could no longer be read.

“Am I... lost?” he wondered. No, he could always get back to the gate using his smartphone’s compass app. Still, he had no idea where he was at the moment. And the remote mountain setting presented another problem: he wasn’t getting 3G, let alone wireless internet.

The September sunlight was still harsh. It glared blindingly off the white, cracked asphalt. Traversing all the hills had caused him to sweat profusely. The heat was unbelievable.

“Whew...” He walked up a long hill, panting for breath. The path here was wide; he was flanked by the remains of attractions long since deteriorated.

Actually... these weren’t exactly attractions. They were haunted houses, shooting ranges, carnival games, and lunch corners: rusted and weather-beaten; faded, dirty, and overgrown.

But even among them, Seiya noticed one building still intact. The sign was faded and hard to read. All he could see was “—us” on the far right side. But the walls were in good condition, and it was almost unusually clean.

What’s that place? he was thinking, when just then, he heard a hoarse voice.

“H-H-Hey! Y-You there, young man!”

“...?”

“Yes, y-you there! What are you d-d-doing here?”

Seiya turned to see an old man, dressed in a worn track suit. His hair and beard were overgrown and wild; he wore a ratty towel like a cape, and he limped toward Seiya, dragging one foot behind him. He was, in a word, the quintessential homeless man.

“I’m not sure how to answer that...” Seiya finally responded. He genuinely wasn’t. He couldn’t exactly tell some stranger that he was thinking of moving AmaBri here. “I’m just taking a walk. I’m, er... interested in old ruins.”

“Th-This place isn’t a ruin!” the old man protested vigorously. “C-Can’t you

see? It's an am-m-musement park!"

"The ruins of an amusement park, yes," Seiya agreed.

"N-N-No! It's an am-m-musement park!"

"Ah-hah..." The man seemed adamant about the idea, so Seiya just dropped the issue and began to look around. "Er... do you live here, then? Is there anyone else here?" He couldn't see any kind of settlement, at least. Driving out people would be much more difficult than driving out a feral cat colony.

"N-N-No... I d-d-don't want to tell you..."

"No reason to hide it, is there?" Seiya questioned.

"S-Sometimes... people like you come in c-c-crowds and... and a-a-ask all kinds of questions... m-making such a racket..." the old man grumbled. "I'm s-sick of it."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Seiya responded politely.

"S-Sorry?" The old man parted his bangs and looked at Seiya. His eyes were wrinkled and sunken, but they were also unexpectedly sharp. "A-Are you... by y-yourself?"

"Well... at the moment, yes," Seiya said, remembering that he'd left Isuzu behind. He doubted she'd be worried about him, but she might snipe at him later for walking around on his own. He should probably get back to her right away.

"C-Come... over h-here..."

"What? I don't think—"

"Just come along. It w-won't... t-take long." The man started walking toward the building behind him. He seemed to be muttering to himself, but Seiya couldn't make out what he was saying.

Uncertain as to what to do, Seiya remained where he was. Immediately, the old man yelled back at him, "C-Come with me... right now!"

Seiya knew he should probably ignore him and go, but he couldn't help but be curious. The man didn't seem to be dangerous, at least... "Darn it..." Seiya

shrugged and followed after him.

The building was a two-story affair, designed to look like a single story from the outside; a common layout for these minor attractions. The second floor would be full of maintenance corridors and lighting equipment. It was all a mess from its long abandonment, and light streamed in from holes in the ceiling.

The first floor was divided into several small rooms, but collapsing of the walls here and there made it hard to tell where corridors ended and rooms began. They went further in, until they arrived at a rather large hall. Here, it was surprisingly neat and tidy, with no trash or broken-down equipment. There was just a slightly elevated stage, surrounded by a half-circle arrangement of folding chairs.

“S-Sit down,” the old man said.

“Sit down?” Seiya asked. “Why?”

“J-Just... s-sit,” the old man ordered.

“All right...” Having no other choice, Seiya sat down in one of the spectator(?) seats. The dusty folding chair let out an unnerving creak beneath his weight.

The old man came up onto the stage. “N... now I’m going to perform.”

“Perform?”

“Y-Your attention, please. Attention.”

“Um...”

“I’m g-going to perform! Attention, please!”

“Um, but—” Seiya didn’t understand what was going on.

While he sat there, dumbfounded, the man quickly began preparing his “performance.” He pulled out a small candle, the kind you’d put on a birthday cake. “N-Now... I’m going to light it.”

“.....” Seiya waited.

“I w-won’t use a l-lighter, or a m-match. B-But I’ll light it. M-Mysterious... eh?”

“Uh, sure...”

“N-Now, pay close attention...” The old man began to rub the wick, purposefully, between thumb and forefinger.

Ugh... Seiya could see a lot to criticize here. First, the man shouldn’t tell the audience what was about to happen; if you told them you were going to light the candle before you did, you would lose the air of surprise.

Besides, the candle-lighting trick was one of the oldest in the book. You just had to rig the wick up with some magnesium or phosphorus sulfide. Even Seiya could perform that trick better than this— “Th-That’s strange... urhmm...” The old man continued to struggle, but he just couldn’t get the flame to light. Seiya waited three minutes. The candle never caught fire.

“Well... th-th-these things h-happen...” the old man said, as he threw the candle to the floor in annoyance. “It’s p-probably just... the angle!”

“Angle?” Seiya questioned.

“Th-The humidity! I-It’s all wrong...” Grumbling to himself, the old man pulled out a deck of cards. They were the really cheap kind you’d find sold in shops like Daiso. “P-Pick any c-card you like from the d-d-deck!”

“Okay...”

“Th-Then I’ll guess which one it w-was. D-Draw!” The old man approached him on unsteady legs, then offered up the deck with trembling hands. Before Seiya could take one, though, the old man dropped the cards. “Ah... Ah. Ahhh...” the old man coughed in dismay, as they spilled out all over the floor. In an absolutely pathetic sight, the old man got down on his hands and knees and started to gather them up.

“.....” Finding it awkward to just sit back in his folding chair and wait, Seiya knelt down and tried to help him.

“D-Don’t touch them!” the old man cried out, and Seiya found his hand slapped away. This motion, too, was weak, but it still left him surprised and dumbfounded. For whatever reason, this old man was trying to show him a magic trick. In other words, Seiya was his audience—how could he treat him this way?

“I-I’ll p-p-pick them up. Y-You just... watch.”

“But—”

“W-Watch!” With that trembling, high-pitched shout, the old man continued to scoop up his cards... but he could barely even manage that.

Seiya had no choice but to sit there and wait. It probably took five minutes in all. At last, the old man finished gathering them up and began to shuffle them again, slowly. A few remained at his feet, but he didn’t notice them.

“D-Draw,” the old man demanded. Seiya did as he was told. It was the three of hearts. “N-Now put it back.” Seiya put the card back without showing it to the man. “Now... sh-shuffle.” He handed Seiya the cards, and Seiya shuffled them. “G-Give it back!” He did so.

“N-Now, let me guess... W-W-Wait just a... minute...” With unsteady hands, the old man searched through the cards. Even a novice magician could probably do better than this. It seemed unlikely that this old man would guess the three of hearts. This was a classic old trick called ‘the ambitious card;’ Seiya had learned it when he was a child. Normally, you’d put the card on the top of the deck and show it off that way. You didn’t just try to verbally guess it.

But the old man spoke: “Th-The six of diamonds.”

He was wrong, but Seiya said nothing.

The old man was bursting with confidence. “D-Did you... enjoy that?”

“Huh?”

“D-Did you enjoy it?!”

“Um... er, well...” Seiya hadn’t enjoyed it at all, but he had to admit it was a novel experience.

The old man muttered to himself, scratching his head. The action caused flakes the size of fingernails to fall, and Seiya grimaced at the sight. “A-Anyway... wh-what are you d-d-doing here?” the old man demanded to know.

“I’m starting to wonder that myself...” Seiya grumbled.

“Sh-Show’s over. G-Go home.” The old man waved his hand as if swatting flies, then turned to leave.

“It’s over?”

“I-It’s over.”

“Hang on a minute. None of this makes any sense...” Being polite with the man was starting to feel like a nuisance. Seiya returned to his usual bluntness as he stormed after him. “Are you always here, doing this? Performing magic tricks for intruders?”

“G-Go home,” the old man told him.

“But it’s dangerous!” Seiya protested. “Haven’t you run into anyone violent?”

The urban explorer types were probably respectful enough, but you could get bad eggs in a place like this, too; they’d trash the structures or paint graffiti just for fun, and torture any squatters they found for their own amusement. Seiya had seen more than one news report of someone venting their frustrations by beating an old person to death. His question wasn’t purely out of concern for the man, of course; he also didn’t want someone dying on the site they were planning on moving to.

“I’m f-f-fine...” The old man entered a door in the back of the hall. It was probably a corridor leading backstage. “G-Go home.”

“But...” Hesitant to just turn back, Seiya followed him into the dark passageway. The floor was littered with all kinds of things, and it was hard to find secure footing. It looked like a hoarder’s house.

They came out of the building. The flower beds behind the ruins had been turned into fields for eggplants, onions, mustard greens... there seemed to be tubers planted, too. Was the old man growing them all? At the very least, there was no danger of him starving to death.

On the other side of the field, Seiya saw something like a grave marker. It came up to about Seiya’s waist; dozens of fist-sized rocks, piled up on top of each other. It couldn’t be a human grave, of course. It was probably for a pet dog, or something like it.

Beside a grove of trees, Seiya could see a small hut built out of scrap material, a cooking range made out of rocks and concrete, and a rusty pot. A large plastic bucket contained household water.

He's really made himself at home... Seiya thought. *And for quite a few years, at that.* He couldn't believe this had never been a problem before. Were the real estate company and the city even doing their jobs? "How long have you been here?" he asked the old man.

"I... I d-don't know. Go h-home." Despite his refrain, though, the old man showed no signs of trying to drive him out by force. He probably just didn't care.

The old man drank some water from the bucket, using a plastic bottle cut in half as a cup. There were dead bugs floating in the water's surface. Seiya shuddered; his interest had acquired a sort of rubbernecking quality. Despite knowing it was rude, he poked his face inside the hut.

The inside was a mess, too, but what drew his eyes more than anything were the written materials on display; books, books, and more books. The bookshelves were stuffed with novels and magazines, instruction manuals, nonfiction, dictionaries, annuals, and manga in all genres. There were the kind of "true stories" manga for women sold in convenience stores, and engineering documents you only saw in large bookstores. Lots of Western books, too. The old man must be going out into town to collect things people threw away.

He must be an avid reader, Seiya decided. Fluent in English, too, perhaps. But the randomness of the assortment made it impossible for him to tell any more than that.

Next to a pile of bundled-up rags Seiya assumed must be the bed, he noticed a small cage. It was full of shredded newspaper, and contained a small dish full of sunflower seeds. Probably a hamster. He could see it immediately as he got closer: a white hamster poked its nose out of its little nest. Did it think he was bringing it food?

"Hmm?" The hamster looked on the skinny side. Maybe it hadn't been fed properly. "There, there..." He offered it a curious finger. The hamster didn't react immediately, but it eventually approached the finger, nose twitching. Its cute button eyes were pale and cloudy. Was it blind?

"What are you doing?!" The old man exploded from behind. He sounded so angry that it caused Seiya to flinch. Frightened of the voice, perhaps, the

hamster withdrew swiftly into its nest.

“G-Get away from there!” The old man charged.

“But I wasn’t—”

“G-G-Get away!” The old man tried to shove Seiya, but he was so weak that it was the old man who was sent flying instead. “Urgh...” He hit the ground hard. Seiya tried to help him up, but the old man slapped his hand away. “G-G-Get away from me!”

“Look, I’m sorry for barging in,” Seiya tried to apologize. “But you don’t have to be so—”

“G-Get out!”

“Guh...” Seiya grunted. The man had started throwing his manga and magazines. Seiya shielded his face with his arms, running out of the hut.

“G-G-Get out! Get lost! You... you h-h-hoodlum!”

“What’s the big deal?” Seiya protested. “It’s just a hamster!”

“G-Get out!”

“Okay, I’m sorry! But—”

“Get out!”

“Urgh...” The old man wouldn’t budge. Left with no other choice, Seiya just shrugged and walked away. *For heaven’s sake. What’s he so angry about? None of this makes any sense, especially those weird tricks he did...*

Forget you, then. If I put out an eviction order and you try to resist it, I won’t help you. I’ll toss you out on your ass like the mad old squatter you are. Seiya stopped outside the hut and turned around. He thought the man might be trying to follow him, but he hadn’t; he had started talking to the hamster, as if he’d forgotten that Seiya was ever there.

“Was it scary? Are you okay now? Are you hungry?” Seiya could only hear snippets, but that was roughly what it sounded like; the old man’s voice was overflowing with love and care.

All that, for just a hamster? What’s that old man thinking? He tried to be

dismissive, but Seiya still felt a strange chill up his spine, and found himself walking swiftly away.

“Absolutely pathetic...” Seiya whispered to himself, once he’d gotten some distance from the hut. He didn’t know who that old man was. He didn’t want to know. All those bizarre tricks, the way he treasured that hamster... Seiya couldn’t muster any interest about any of it. He just found it pitiful; pitiful and ugly.

The man had lived there for decades just to end up like that. To let that be the way your life ended... If he left that touched-in-the-head old man there, he’d eventually freeze to death in winter or get heatstroke in summer and die, one or the other. Neither ending was how any man should go out.

That’s what people call “one of life’s losers,” Seiya thought. *Gives me chills... like I’m going to catch bad luck just from being near him. I want to forget that old man as soon as possible.* These were the unvarnished feelings of Kanie Seiya, 17-year-old boy.

Ugh, seriously... that was unsettling. He found those thoughts entering his mind as he kept walking, when he caught sight of that tapir again. It was down the path, just past a brick building, at a fork in the road. That little round tapir that resembled a piglet...

That’s right. It was following that tapir through the hall of mirrors that led me here... Seiya tried to follow it again, but the tapir got further away.

He continued to follow it, anyway. *Wait, tapir.* The tapir didn’t wait, though. It just got further and further away.

That’s when he heard a voice nearby. “Seiya-kun?”

“Sento?” The next thing he knew, it was Sento at the fork in the road. The tapir was nowhere to be seen.

“Where have you been? I’ve been searching everywhere.” There was anger in Isuzu’s voice.

“What,” Seiya asked, “are you mad at me?”

“Yes. I thought you had been in some kind of accident. Don’t you realize how

worried I was?”

“Oh, calm down. I was only gone for fifteen minutes.”

“What are you talking about?” Isuzu demanded coldly. “It’s been four hours.”

“What?” It was then that Seiya realized it: night was falling around them. Since they were in a mountain valley, the sun set early, and the sky was already a dusky indigo. “That can’t be,” he protested. “I was just—”

Confused, he took out his smartphone. It was already 6:30. “Ugh...” he groaned. “What’s going on here?”

Seeing him so confused, Isuzu’s expression turned concerned. “Did you fall and wind up unconscious? It might have affected your memories.”

“No. I didn’t fall, and I’m not hurt. I was chasing that tapir...”

“A tapir?” she questioned. “You mean, the animal?”

“A tapir,” he confirmed. “Before we got separated, I think I said it was a cat. But it wasn’t a cat; it was a tapir.”

“Seiya-kun... are you certain you’re all right?”

“I’m totally fine! ...I mean, to be honest, I’m actually not sure right now. The point is, there was a tapir. That’s pretty unusual, right?”

“I suppose... that is unusual,” Isuzu admitted.

“Most people would follow it, wouldn’t they?”

“I’m not sure *most* would, but it wouldn’t be unusual to do so,” she agreed.

“Then I came to this weird theater,” he went on, “and I met this old man.”

“Old man?”

“I think he was homeless... well, he was a squatter technically, I guess. That old man... he performed for me, and... um...” Seiya trailed off. Now that he was saying it out loud, he realized how crazy it sounded. Even though it was only a few minutes ago, it already felt like the distant past.

“You can explain later,” Isuzu told him firmly. “For now, we should find our way out.”

“R-Right...” he agreed. They were on an abandoned property, which meant there was no lighting, and things were getting darker and darker by the minute. Once the sun set completely, they’d be lost in the ruins.

“I told Handa-san to go back,” Isuzu told him. “She’s waiting at her office, and she’ll come and pick us up if we call her.”

“I see... I’ve made a lot of trouble, I guess,” Seiya said.

“I don’t mind. I’m just glad that you’re safe.”

“I didn’t mean for you. I meant for Handa-san.”

“.....” Isuzu’s typically sour expression became even more dangerous. “You’re a louse, you know.”

“Heh. You expect a man of my greatness to apologize to *you*?”

“I spent four hours searching around these ruins for you,” she told him acerbically.

“Then you must have gotten a good view of the property. Anyway, let’s hurry.” Seiya began to walk, heading for the ruined amusement park’s entrance.

4: Hotel California

The darkness ended up falling faster than they expected. The path was pitch black in front of them. Not a single light was working in the old place, and the sky was too cloudy for the moonlight to be any help. They no longer knew which way to go to reach the entrance. They could barely even see each other in the dark.

“What should we do?” Isuzu wondered.

“H-Hold on,” Seiya told her. “I think there was a sign around here...” He used his smartphone’s flashlight app, which produced a powerful beam of light. He swept it around, illuminating a sign, and checking their position. “Over there,” he said. “This is the way.”

“All right,” Isuzu agreed. “Let’s go.” But, because of the state of their surroundings, the path was unsteady. The tall grass growing through the cracked asphalt and fallen structures made it hard to simply follow the signs. They’d hit dead end after dead end. Potholes and dips and pieces of rubble in the path made just walking around treacherous. The smartphone’s light was indispensable.

“This isn’t good...” Seiya mumbled.

“What’s wrong?”

“The battery...” He’d just realized that his smartphone’s battery was down to 10%. Actually, it was now 9%. “Sento,” he said. “How are things on your end?”

“My smartphone?” she checked. “It’s down to 6%.”

“What?!” Seiya was flabbergasted. *You idiot! And you call yourself my secretary?* “My expectations are low, but I might as well ask... do you have a spare battery?”

“No,” she told him shortly.

“Awesome,” Seiya snarked. “It’s so great to have you here!”

Isuzu glared at him. “...I tried repeatedly to contact you after you went

missing,” she told him coldly. “That’s how I used up my spare battery.”

“You still could have done something!”

“What, exactly?” she asked. “Anyway, I think you should contact Handa-san.”

He looked and saw that they just barely had phone service here. It would be wise to try to get in touch with her while they still had battery remaining. Seiya tried calling Handa-san’s cell phone, but it wouldn’t go through. Maybe she was away, or she hadn’t heard it ringing. His repeated calls caused his remaining battery to tick down from 8% to 7%. “Come on, pick up...” But she wouldn’t pick up.

“What should we do?”

“I guess we’ll just keep calling until the battery runs out... no, that would be reckless,” Seiya decided. “Let’s try to find the way out first.”

“True...” Isuzu agreed. “If we can get out of these ruins, we might be able to find a local convenience store...”

As they turned the smartphone light back on and started walking, Isuzu grabbed his sleeve.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing... I just don’t want to get separated,” she mumbled back.

“...Right.”

“It’s pitch black. That’s all it is.”

“Well... okay. Just don’t let go.” He felt a little restless for some reason. Hanging together, Seiya and Isuzu wandered around the ruins, side by side, using the smartphone to illuminate the ground ahead. At last, Seiya’s battery ran out. “Sento,” he said. “Let me see your smartphone.”

“All right...” In the darkness, Isuzu hesitantly handed over her smartphone. For some reason, the wallpaper was a photo of an open-air bath. A rock-lined hot bath with no one in it, and steam billowing from the top. A scene of rustic beauty. Had she downloaded it from some hot springs hotel’s promotional site?

“Why an open-air bath?” he questioned.

“What’s wrong with it?” Isuzu replied defensively. “Don’t criticize my preferences.”

“I’m not criticizing. But is this what you’re into? These old man-style hot springs?”

“See? You *are* criticizing.”

“I just thought it was weird. You don’t have to get testy. I just—”

“Would you please hurry? The battery will run out soon.”

“Ah, that’s right...” he agreed. She was right. This was no time for bickering. The two of them hurried on ahead.

They found the exit around the time Isuzu’s smartphone battery had ticked down to 2%. The lights lining the highway had come into view.

“At least we won’t be stranded there...” He was genuinely relieved.

Isuzu also let out a sigh of relief. “Goodness...”

“Anyway, I’d better call Handa-san...” He looked at the smartphone, but this time it said ‘No Service.’ “Ah, dammit!” Maybe they’d get through closer to the road. Holding the smartphone, he ran for the exit. Isuzu hurried after him, but her high-heels slowed her down.

“Come on, signal! Come on, signal!” The signal came. Two bars and 3G! “Yes!” He was about to call Handa-san, but he was stymied again. It was Isuzu’s smartphone, and a Blackberry instead of the iPhone Seiya was used to using.

Why a Blackberry?! You damned contrarian! But cursing about it wouldn’t get him anywhere. *All right, where’s the address? She called while I was gone, so she must have Handa-san’s contact information... Call history, call history...*

“Give it to me!” Isuzu finally caught up and he handed her the phone. She used it swiftly and called Handa-san’s number, then put the smartphone to her ear and waited ten seconds.

While he watched with bated breath, she pulled the smartphone away from her ear, glared silently at the screen and whispered, “It’s out of battery.”

There was no chance of getting a ride now, so they decided to walk to the

station. It had been twenty minutes by car, so if they walked quickly, they could get there in an hour and a half. It was probably around eight o'clock now, which meant they might make it in time for the last train.

With luck, Seiya thought, they'd run into a taxi on the way—but not only were there no taxis, there were almost no cars passing at all. Once, a kei-truck driven by an apparent local passed by, and Seiya raised his hand to try to hitchhike, but the old driver just held up a hand with a smile and drove past; he must have thought Seiya was just waving to him.

There were no convenience stores, either. But then, they were on a remote mountain road—of course there weren't any convenience stores. He was hungry and thirsty. He was concerned about the way Isuzu was lagging behind him, too. She said little, and her face was contorted in pain. He was surprised by her apparent lack of stamina—wasn't she a member of the Maple Land royal guard?

"Wait." Isuzu stopped.

"What's wrong?" asked Seiya.

"My shoes..." Isuzu stopped and took off her pumps. It was hard to see in the scattered light from the streetlamps, but her feet seemed to be aching. "If I'd known we were coming to a place like this, I would have worn sneakers..." Isuzu had dressed for a day in the city—probably because Seiya hadn't told her where they were going in advance.

"Oh, really?" he asked. "Are you saying this is my fault?"

Isuzu glared at him. "That wasn't my intent, but you've just changed my mind. Yes, I *am* saying it's your fault, Seiya-kun."

"Hmph. Can you still walk?"

"Yes," she replied shortly. Isuzu took off her shoes and began tottering along in just her stocking feet; it looked like there were serious blisters on her pinkie toes, which were causing her sharp pain with every step she took.

"Okay, enough... here." He tried to lend her a shoulder to lean on, but she swatted his hand away.

“Stop it.”

“Don’t give me the tough-girl act. You’re in pain, right?”

“If you consider me a burden, you can go on ahead,” she told him stonily.
“You might yet make the last train.”

“You know I can’t do that,” he said.

“Why not? It’s not as if my life is in danger. Besides, you have work tomorrow; you should go home and get some sleep, shouldn’t you?” Isuzu’s voice was emphatic to a degree that made it obvious she was forcing it a bit.

“You are just...” Seiya was uncertain, exhausted, and annoyed—yet at the same time, he felt some kind of indescribable urge. Not an urge to yell at her or rebuke her—just the opposite, in fact. He wanted to fight her a little, to get her to let him carry her. He wasn’t sure himself why he felt that way. “Fine, keep walking; get it out of your system,” he sighed. “I’ll stay with you until then.”

“No. You should go ahead.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Er... well, because you’re right,” he admitted. “It’s my fault for not telling you where we were going. And I do feel... a little bad about that.”

Isuzu looked slightly surprised by that response, then simply said “Ah...” before falling silent and continuing her slow, limping walk. Gritting his teeth, Seiya slowed to walk by her side. They kept that up for about ten minutes, but Isuzu’s pace just continued to slow. She was clearly holding back considerable pain to maintain an outwardly placid demeanor, and it had Seiya flustered. They kept at it until, at last, the faint lights of the city came into view.

They passed a Shinkin bank building with a clock on display; it was currently 10:28.



If they wanted to get back to Tokyo, they didn't have much time before the last train left the station. He wished Isuzu would let him support her so they could hurry up and catch it... but she wouldn't. And then, even if they hurried, there was no way to know if they'd catch it at this point. On top of that, Isuzu was slowing down more and more.

Rain began to fall. It started as a drizzle, but before long, it turned to hard drops. The weather was still warm, but it was enough to make Seiya's muscles clench up, and for his skin to raise goosebumps.

Dammit... he thought, and resisted the urge to cluck his tongue at her; it was obvious, even to him, that such an act would hurt Isuzu's feelings, since she was the one who was slowing them down. That would be bad right now—really, really bad.

The rain was chilling Seiya to the bone, and if he was feeling that way, Isuzu was probably feeling even worse.

Around the time they arrived at the large suspension bridge built over the shores of Sanami Lake, Seiya reached a conclusion: it was too late to make the last train. He'd caught a glimpse of the Sanami Lake Station timetable when they'd first arrived, and though his memory was fuzzy, he recalled seeing one train to Tokyo at 11:00. That would have to be the last one. That train would be leaving in ten minutes. No matter how fast they went now, it would take at least thirty minutes to get to the station. There was no sign of taxis coming, either.

"Sento," he said.

"...Yes?"

"We're not going to make it. We should give up on the station."

Isuzu stopped, staring. "Give up on the station?"

"Yeah," he told her. "We're not going to make the last train."

"...Then what do you propose?" she asked.

"Stay the night."

"Stay the night? Where?"

“Hmm... good question.” Rationally speaking, there weren’t many lodging houses that would take them in at a time like this, and since Sanami Lake’s tourist facilities were mainly designed for day trips, there weren’t many of those to choose from to begin with. Seiya thought he remembered seeing a family restaurant near the station, but it was probably the kind that closed up at two in the morning.

On top of that, the rain was growing worse. It was only September, yet he was freezing. He could probably deal with camping out somewhere, but that would be hard on Isuzu. He remembered her strange constitution; how she’d start to feel ill if she didn’t get a hot bath three times a day. It had probably been over ten hours since they’d met up that morning; there might be more to her discomfort now than just exhaustion.

Seiya stood in the rain, thinking over various options, and finally fixed his eyes on a resplendent building about 100 meters down the road. It looked a bit like a castle, with white and blue walls and extravagant lighting. The next thing he saw were neon signs reading “Stop-ins” and “Overnights.” The Hotel Alamo. It was the exact same name and logo as the love hotel next to AmaBri.

It’s a damned chain?! Surprised at first by the realization, Seiya considered the facts once again, and then said, “Let’s spend the night over there.”

“What?” Isuzu had probably noticed the love hotel as well, but regardless, she froze up at the proposal, her eyes going wide.

“Let’s stay the night and get some rest,” Seiya said patiently. “We don’t have a choice, right?”

“B-But...” she stammered.

“Ah... d-don’t worry. It’s a stopgap thing. We just need somewhere with a roof, that’s all. Nothing else to it.” *Wait, what else would there be?* He wasn’t even sure what he was talking about. “O-Of course, we don’t have to if you don’t want to! If we walk a little while longer, we might find a roofed porch, or...”

“Well...” Isuzu began, then averted her eyes and mumbled something. He couldn’t quite make out what it was. “.....ay.”

“What was that?” he asked.

“All right,” Isuzu managed to choke out. “Let’s stay.”

Naturally, it was Seiya’s first time in a love hotel. His first challenge was finding the entrance: the fence seemed to go all the way around it, but there were a few breaks in it here and there. Each time he approached one, thinking he’d found the way in, it turned out to be an employee entrance or parking gate. He paced back and forth in front of the fence several times, with Isuzu following behind. He hated feeling this incompetent at something.

Then, when he finally found the automatic door and went inside, he found something new to confound him: The automatic check-in system. The wall was lined with pictures of rooms—though more precisely, they were pictures of beds. The word “Vacant” glowed above the lit-up photo panels, while the darkened panels... were probably in use.

It was easy to imagine the mechanism at play: If you pressed the button for a “Vacant” room, it would spit out the appropriate key card. About 20% of the rooms were vacant, and all the cheap rooms were already taken, leaving only expensive ones—those 15,000 yen per night and over. They had enough money on hand to pay it, but it was still a chunk of change; despite his position as acting manager, Seiya’s personal finances remained those of a high school student working part-time.

Speaking of high school students... were they even allowed to stay at love hotels? It seemed the system setup would keep them from having to interact with anyone, so it was probably all right, of course... even so, the rooms were pricey. He hadn’t been expecting to pay this much just to get a room for the night. He felt a little exploited.

“It’s pretty expensive...” he muttered.

“Yes, it is,” Isuzu agreed.

“Hey, you think we can charge this to—”

“Absolutely not,” she said with certainty.

“Ah... yeah. I guess not, huh?” There was no way he could show the receipt for this escapade to Ashe, their head of finances. She wasn’t a gossip, exactly,

but she'd probably ask him to explain the charge, while glaring at him with a mix of curiosity and revulsion.

"We can't charge it to the park," Isuzu said. "We'll need to pay it out-of-pocket. I'll cover half."

"No," Seiya protested, "I can't let you do that."

"Why not?"

"Well, at times like these... th-the man should pay," he muttered.

"I thought we were just getting out of the rain," Isuzu pointed out. "It's not as if... we're on a date."

"That's true. Yeah... you're right." Still, it felt a little humiliating. *That's right*, he remembered. The first time he'd gone to AmaBri with Sento Isuzu, it had been under the guise of a date. He recalled love hotels coming up during the bus ride there, too... this situation was actually a hundred times more embarrassing than that.

"....." He cast a glance at Isuzu. She looked rather pitiful, drenched and exhausted. He was hesitant about making her split the fee in her current state, but her logic was sound. "We'll go Dutch, then," he decided. "How's that?"

"Fine," she agreed. "B-But... do we even have to pay in advance?"

"...? Now that you mention it... there's no place to put money in..." There was nowhere to insert bills or coins, just a slot to spit out the key card. "We must pay after, right?"

"...Surely it's a mistake to have people pay after, when you haven't even met them," Isuzu protested. "Couldn't one simply stay as long as they wanted, then run off?"

"You expect me to know?" Seiya demanded. It was a bizarre thing to fixate on at a time like this. "Anyway... w-we need to pick our room. Japanese-or Western-style?"

"You... You pick," she told him.

"Okay. In that case... hmm..."

“Hurry.”

“I’m trying...”

Just then, the hall echoed with the sound of the automatic door opening. Someone had come in from the parking lot entrance. It was an unfamiliar man and woman—more customers.

Seiya and Isuzu were so shocked that they nearly jumped out of their skin, then reflexively began looking for a place to hide. But there was no place large enough to hold both of them, and before they could work something out, the couple arrived at the vending machine.

“Ah... you can... go on ahead,” Seiya said in a tiny voice. Isuzu hid behind him, trembling.

He was a “man of means” type over 40; she was flashily-dressed woman of about 30. “You’re sure? All right,” the older man said, picked his room, took his key card, then walked swiftly with the woman to the elevator. As the door began closing, the woman whispered to him, “isn’t that cute?” and the man guffawed.

Why do I feel patronized?! Seiya wondered. That laughter—it was the laughter of a man who’d just seen a naive teenage couple taking their first try at a love hotel, and panicking because they didn’t know what to do. Because that’s exactly what this was!

“Sento?” he said.

“.....” Isuzu remained hidden behind Seiya. He glanced back at her, and she quickly came to her senses and jumped away. She’d looked like someone in a daze, after escaping the closest call of her life.

“Are you okay?” he tried again.

“S-Sorry, I...” She was probably embarrassed about hiding behind him at such a crucial moment. There were even tears in her eyes. “Just... just pick a room. Anywhere is acceptable.”

“Ah... right.” Seiya wanted to rest as soon as possible. Spurred on by that thought, he pressed the button for a random 18,000 yen room from among the

vacancies.

They stood in silence for the entire trip up the elevator, then all the way through the corridor, until they reached their room and turned the knob. It was only after they entered the room that the mystery of the payment system was solved. The moment they used their key card and entered, the door automatically locked. The entryway space had a touchscreen and an automatic payment mechanism. In other words, you would make your final payment just before you left.

I guess you couldn't just run away... but what if you made a mistake and couldn't pay? he wondered. *Would you be stuck in the room forever? There's a terrifying thought...* Just as he was thinking that, he noticed a telephone handset next to the payment screen.

Ah-ha. Yeah, that would do it... There was probably an on-call employee you could talk to... though, personally, he would never ever ever want to have to talk to that person.

Seiya flipped the light switch. Now that they were inside, he could see that the room was quite large; a little over 20 square meters. It was a Western-style room with atmospheric lighting and a king-sized bed. But what surprised him even more was how pristine the room was; he had imagined something older and seedier, with yellowed sheets and dripping faucets, but that couldn't be further from the case. The wallpaper was neat and trim; the sheets were flattened and tucked with military precision. The bathroom was similarly spotless, and offered soap, shampoo, and the full array of amenities.

"...It's beautiful," Isuzu said, sounding stunned.

"Yeah. It's kind of..." Like a typical luxury hotel. Seiya had stayed in a number of luxury hotels in his child actor days. While doing location shoots, he typically stayed in rooms that ran for 50,000 yen a night. That's how he could tell that this was a very nice room, even though it was only (sorry) an old love hotel from a mediocre chain. In terms of overall cleanliness, it was the equal to any luxury hotel he'd ever been in.

"It's wonderful. I really can't believe it." Isuzu reached for the bed and touched the pristine sheets.

The bed was large; very large. It could hold the both of them with room to spare. Actually, it could probably hold three people if needed... that's how big the bed was.

"Seiya-kun..." Isuzu trailed off.

"...?" He waited for her to go on.

"I... I think I..." Her voice was cracked. Her eyes were wet. Her cheeks were flushed.

"What?"

"I... I can't take it anymore."

"Huh?"

"I need a bath..." she breathed.

"R-Right..." Seiya slumped, both in relief and disappointment. "Go on, then. Take as long as you want."

"Thank you." Isuzu immediately made a beeline for the bathroom.

For better or worse (no, definitely for better) the bathroom was completely partitioned off from the bedroom; despite what he'd heard about love hotels, there was no one-way glass or window giving him a view of what happened within. He could hear the sounds of the shower, but he had no idea what was going on there. This helped Seiya to forget the hotel's nature, and to make himself at home. He opened a cabinet that looked like it might contain drinks, but instead of a refrigerator, he found a vending machine. A vending machine...

The first thing he saw was changes of underwear; boxers and T-shirts for men. Useful. For women... there were a few startling options. Pleather bondage stuff, stuff with convenient openings... and some normal offerings as well, of course.

There were "toys" there, too, in what looked like a versatile selection. Seiya didn't know what they were all for, but they seemed cheaper than he would have imagined. The cheapest among them was about 500 yen.

"...Hmm." The fridge was on another shelf. The drinks sat in slots like a vending machine, so removing one of the bottles would log it as a purchase and count towards your room fee. Seiya was thirsty, so he took a bottle of mineral

water and gulped it down.

There was a place to charge smartphones, too, with adapters for iPhones, Androids, and old-fashioned feature phones. Amazing! Even a luxury hotel in the city wouldn't have that many adapters... and if they did, they'd probably charge 2,000 yen a day for the privilege of using them.

Love hotels were truly incredible. The market forces involved seemed to have pushed them to provide services even greater than those of most luxury hotels, in fact.



Seiya immediately plugged in his smartphone. While it charged, he checked his incoming calls and his inbox.

First, he wrote an email to Handa-san from the real estate company, apologizing and telling her he'd call her the next day. He also had emails from Tricen, Ashe, Moffle, and Macaron— These were all about work.

Moffle seemed to have noticed something amiss about the business trip (good intuition, the rat had), and had emailed him to say, "I don't know what you're thinking, but if it's important, you'd better tell me soon, fumo." Seiya punched out a response that skirted the issue and sent it.

He had emails from people outside the company, too. Ebisu Real Estate. Saganuma-san.

".....?" That was another real estate agent who'd been helping him find possible sites for AmaBri, and they were offering him a number of candidates.

<<Maple Industries, Kanie-sama>> the letter began.

<<Greetings. This is Saganuma of Ebisu Real Estate. Regarding the matter we discussed the other day, I'm sorry to say that I haven't found a property that meets your exact specifications. I'm afraid such a property may be difficult to find within the metropolitan area. With the above in mind, let me offer three properties that may come close to what you're looking for: (1) 203 Nishitani, Tokushima City, Hiki District, Saitama Prefecture.

This is a golf course that closed in 2009. It is 20 minutes from Meikoku Station. It has good access from the city center, and the area is about 250,000 square meters, which is about one half of what you requested.

See the link below for details.

<http://www.xxxxxxxx.xxx>

(2) 4341 Ogino, Midori Ward, Sanami Lake City, Kanagawa Prefecture This is the former Sanami Amusement Park, which closed in 1996. The land area is about right, but unfortunately, access is bad. Prefectural Highway 524 is very narrow and unaccommodating to large buses. Other than that, it's a promising site.

See the link below for details.

<http://www.xxxxxxx.xxx>

(3) 2-1-3 Kamikita, Shibuya Ward, Tokyo.

This is just for reference. The land area is 1/100th of what you hoped for, and the price is 100 times your asking price. In other words, it's not what you wanted at all, but it's in a great location in the heart of the city. You can't beat it for access. It's just a five minute walk from Shibuya Station. The land was used to house a theater owned by a troupe that broke up last year. After the earthquake, it was pointed out how bad the foundations were, and more importantly there's pending litigation over an accident in the theater in the past, so it's a major steal at the moment. It's just for reference, though.

<http://www.xxxxxxx.xxx>

I hope you'll consider these offers,>> the letter concluded.

A depressed mood fell over Seiya. Of the three sites that Saganuma-san had proposed, the most promising was (2); it was the same one that Handa-san had offered them through Kagaya Estates, the ruins he had wandered around just that day.

Regarding (1), the land in Saitama, he'd checked it before. Unfortunately, it was too small, and the access wasn't as good as Saganuma-san suggested. Even the Sanami Lake property might be better.

Then as far as (3), the land in Shibuya, went... *I almost feel insulted*, Seiya thought angrily. *Did the agent even listen to me? I'd said it had to be within the metropolitan area, a ways away from the city center, with plenty of land—those were my conditions. Who the hell is going to pay to put it in that expensive-ass place in the middle of the city? And 100 times the price?! For 1/100th of the area?! I'm not trying to rent out offices and shops. I want an amusement park out in the country where I can sit back and relax. I mean... in the heart of the city? What a joke!*

Biting back his annoyance, he wrote a reply: <<Thank you very much. I'll have a look at these offerings, but I hope you'll continue looking for other properties.>> ...Or something like that.

Seiya was finishing up a few other things when he heard the sound of a hair dryer in the bathroom. His focus on work emails had caused him to forget about Isuzu's current state. Now, he was feeling a little anxious again. He finished sorting through his work folder and found two emails in his private one.

One was from his step-sister, Saki; a boy in her class had asked her out, and she wasn't sure whether to accept or not. <<What do you think, Seiya-kun?>> she was asking.

<<How should I know? You're always getting asked out. Isn't this the fourth time? You'll just turn him down anyway, so stop bothering me about it.>> He typed out that clipped reply, then sent it.

The other one was from Mikasa, a girl in his class and his aide on the culture festival cafe. She wanted to discuss when to hold the first meeting to bring all the department heads together. He was annoyed; couldn't they discuss that the next time they saw each other at school? The email's content regarding the culture festival was just a few lines, but was followed by a baffling run-on sentence. This seemed to be the long and short of it: <<I never thought you'd offer to be manager>> and <<I'm really impressed>> and <<I hope this helps you fit in with the rest of the class>> and finally, <<I'll do my best, so ask me anything.>> "Hmm..." This girl, Mikasa, seemed to have the wrong idea about something. Seiya wasn't really interested in fitting in with his classmates, and he didn't especially care about holding a great culture festival. His acceptance of the job had been a mere whim on his part—a retreat from the realities of the park, perhaps. It annoyed him to have it interpreted this way, and he didn't want her getting her hopes up.

But then, how to reply? These were the most annoying times to have to write an email or LINE. It was hard to convey nuance in text. A short, offhand response would give a bad impression, but writing an essay would be exhausting. *Maybe I'll just perform...* he thought, typing in quickly: <<Thanks! I'm definitely doing my best! I'm sure it's hard on you, too, but let's make the cafe a success together!>> Would it be so chipper it was suspicious? Would she think he was making fun of her? He was holding his finger over the send button, hesitating, when Isuzu came out of the bathroom unannounced.

Seiya froze up in surprise and, in doing so, accidentally hit the send button.

“Ah!” he cried.

“What’s wrong?” Isuzu asked anxiously.

“Nothing...” he mumbled.

Isuzu was dressed in a bathrobe, her hair drawn up under a towel. Steam rose up around her, and the color had returned to her face. Her robe was tied securely the front, so all he could see was her head and her ankles, but that was enough to cause his heart to race.

“I... I was just answering some emails,” he told her.

“I see... We can charge our phones here?”

“Yeah, though I don’t see one for Blackberry,” he apologized.

“I brought my charger.” Isuzu returned to the bathroom and fetched her bag. He was hit by the smell of shampoo, and when she pulled the charger from her bag, he caught a glimpse of her underwear balled up inside.

“.....” He kept his silence.

Isuzu plugged her phone in and checked her own call history. Seiya moved to the sofa and looked through the menu on the table. He was bored, and didn’t know what else to do. “I... I sent an email to Handa-san,” he said.

“Thanks. Do you want one, too?”

“What?”

“A bath.”

“Oh, r-right... actually, I’m pretty hungry,” he admitted. “Should I order something, first?”

“Do they have room service here?” Isuzu wanted to know.

“It looks like. There’s a menu right here...” There were a few snacks you could order: curry, spaghetti, french fries, and all kinds of drinks.

“W-Would a staff member... bring it to the room? Would they come inside?” Isuzu looked like a survivor of a zombie siege being told, ‘we’re taking down the barricades.’

"I think... probably?" he guessed.

"I'd rather not."

"Do we have a choice?" Seiya demanded irritably. *Is she that desperate not to be seen?* he wondered. *Not that I don't feel the same way...* "I'll answer the door," he finally said, "so you can hole up in the bathroom."

"Are you certain?"

"What choice do we have? Come on."

"...Well, if you insist."

"Here's the menu," He said, handing it to Isuzu. It was an awkward thing, as they kept as far away from each other as they could, with arms outstretched to make the hand-off.

"I don't see any cucumbers," she grumbled.

"Why would there be cucumbers?" *What is with her and cucumbers?* "I was thinking I'd get the curry," he told her.

"Then... I'll have the curry, too."

"Okay." He picked up the phone to make the call.

"Wait!"

"...?" He waited for her to go on.

"I... I'll have the french fries instead."

"Why?" he wanted to know.

"What does it matter?"

"Just eating french fries isn't good for you."

"It's not about that..." Isuzu said, seeming hesitant to explain.

"...? Then why?"

At that, she looked away and said, "Well, curry... it might smell, so..."

Seiya was baffled, unsure of what she meant. Smell? Curry? Of course it might, but it wasn't a bad smell at all... And they were just going to go to bed

after, so what was the big— Wait. They were just going to go to bed. But what if they weren't? What if things turned out... another way? Maybe they should avoid curry after all...

"I... I see," he finally managed.

"I don't mean anything by it, of course..."

"Well... maybe I'll avoid the curry, too."

"What?"

"I... I just changed my mind," he said defensively. "Don't read too much into it."

Seiya picked up the receiver and pressed the intercom button. A man's voice answered. Seiya ordered fries and edamame, as if they were looking for beer snacks. When asked what drinks he wanted, he ordered two oolong teas.

They weren't sure when room service would come, so Seiya decided to hold off on his own shower. Isuzu sat down by the charger, playing around with her smartphone. She was probably replying to emails. Neither said anything; silence reigned. Seiya had assumed they might hear voices from the neighboring rooms, but they didn't; there must be more soundproofing here than in normal hotels.

Not long after, the doorbell rang. Isuzu quickly went into the bathroom, and Seiya answered the door. A trim, ordinary-looking young man answered; he was polite and considerate. He didn't enter the room; he simply handed the tray to Seiya through the door, told him to enjoy himself, and then closed it. Because Seiya was in his street clothes, the man didn't seem to realize that he was in high school.

Seiya tried to act as casually as possible, but he wasn't sure he'd been convincing. Then again... the man probably did this all the time. Maybe he'd grown tired of trying to psychoanalyze the customers.

As Seiya brought the tray to the table, Isuzu peeked out of the bathroom. "Is he gone?"

"Yeah. Let's eat."

They sat down on the sofa as far away from each other as they could, and picked at their fries and edamame. They weren't especially good; maybe they should have gotten the curry. The silence was awkward.

"Let's... watch some TV," Isuzu suggested.

"That's a good idea..." he agreed. Seiya picked up the remote and started flipping through channels. Abruptly, he hit some hardcore porn... and for some reason, it was in English.

Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Mmmm! Yes! So good! Harder! Harder! There was no sense of shame in the voice. 90% of the screen was blurred out, so he couldn't tell what was going on.

He quickly shut it off, and the room fell back into its hypnotic silence. Just the crunch of the fries was loud enough to echo throughout the room. "...Sorry," he said.

"...It's all right."

"I heard s-something once... they have really hard restrictions on that kind of thing over there," Seiya babbled. "Anything even slightly violent is strictly taboo. They have to make sure everything looks consensual and pleasurable, so they have to smile all the time, which makes the acting really over-the-top. That's why Japanese stuff, with more naturalistic acting, is very popular overseas." *Why am I talking about this?* he wondered. He was sure he had heard that tidbit in the company cafeteria at some point, when Tricen was talking to Tiramii and the others.

"You know a lot about it," Isuzu observed.

"Well! I heard from Tricen..."

"You... discuss such things?"

"No!" Seiya flailed awkwardly. "We just happened to run into each other!"

"Well... I wasn't being accusatory," she said. "It just didn't sound like you..."

"Not like me... huh?" he mumbled. "I guess it wouldn't..."

They ate the edamame. They ate the fries. For some reason, Isuzu's words had snapped him to his senses; sure, maybe they were in a love hotel. But all

they were doing was sitting on a sofa, eating snacks. The room was well lit, and it wasn't as if they'd never been alone in a room together before. How was this any different from them sitting on the sofa in the office together, eating their lunches side-by-side? It was true that Isuzu had just gotten out of the bath, that she was probably naked under her robe, and that she smelled vaguely of shampoo...

She looked sexy. *Really* sexy. But Seiya's good sense was much too tenacious, so that wasn't enough to make him lose his reason. He had the same desires any man did, but his amazing self-discipline let him keep them on strict lockdown. Now that he thought about it, he couldn't even imagine how things were supposed to "happen" between them. *In this brightly-lit room?* he thought scornfully. *Am I supposed to put my arm around her shoulders? I couldn't do that. And I'm not even feeling the slightest hint of desire. My fear of the unknown greatly outstrips it.*

Would she make a move, then? Teasingly, like when Tiramii was wearing the gulley suit? That also seemed implausible... which meant that nothing was going to happen. Nothing at all. Seiya felt a strange mix of embarrassment and relief.

"This is awful," said Isuzu, interrupting his train of thought.

"What?"

"The fries," she specified.

"Ah... yes," Seiya agreed, "they're quite bad." Then, he stood up and pointed to the king-sized bed. "Okay, I'm going to wash up," he said. "You can lie down if you want."

Isuzu still seemed a little bit unsettled when she saw how confident he'd become all of a sudden. "What about you?" she asked, growing suspicious.

"I'll sleep on the sofa."

"But—"

"I'm not budging on this," he said flippantly, heading for the vending machine. "Screw gender equality; I'll sleep on the sofa. Oh, and..."

"Yes?"

“That weird vending machine... it apparently sells changes of clothes,” Seiya said evasively, cautiously avoiding the use of the word ‘underwear.’

Isuzu said she wanted to brush her teeth, so Seiya bought some men’s underwear from the vending machine while he waited.

When she came out, he went in.

He found her suit in there, placed on a hanger to dry; she probably thought it would de-wrinkle more easily here, in the bathroom. He hung up his own soaked t-shirt to dry next to it.

Taking a hot shower made him feel like a dead man returning to life. There were lots of towels available, and tons of amenities— He felt impressed all over again. It was a shame that the shampoo and conditioner were no-name brands, but he was in no position to complain.

He was intrigued by the large jacuzzi bathtub, but it would take over thirty minutes to fill, so he let it go. Instead, Seiya wiped himself down, dried his hair, brushed his teeth, and looked in the mirror. The slim, perfectly balanced body. The slight wildness of his tousled hair. *Even naked, I’m irresistible*, he told himself. This was one of his usual rituals, and the fact that he could engage in it was proof of how much he had relaxed.

Seiya put a bathrobe on over his newly-purchased underwear, and then left the bathroom. The room’s main lights were off; the only illumination came from the foot-level lights and the standing lamp.

Ah, she’s already asleep... he realized, stumbling a little through the unfamiliar dark room.

Isuzu was on the sofa, fast asleep, bundled up in a sheet she had pulled from the bed.

Come on, dammit... He’d said he would sleep on the sofa. Why did she have to be so stubborn?

“Hey, Sento,” he said. “Go to the bed.” Isuzu said nothing. Maybe she was just that tired—she showed no response to his verbal prodding.

“Sento. Wake up.” He nudged her shoulder this time. She finally sat up.

“Mm...” she mumbled.

“Go to the bed.”

“But...”

“It’s fine. Go on.” He knelt down next to the sofa to try to sit her up. He shouldn’t have done it.

Until that moment, Seiya had been genuinely relaxed. The strange awkwardness had lifted, and he’d been planning to go right to bed. There shouldn’t have been any more room to slip. It was dark inside the room; the bright lighting that had helped them keep their wits about them before was gone. And in that moment, their faces were closer than they’d been since they first entered the hotel.

She was looking up at him, glassy-eyed. Her lips, pursed and full, opened slightly, as if in thirst.

His body acted instinctively. Their lips met—as if it was inevitable, as if they had been drawn together. Soft, yet firm, with a slight taste of toothpaste... She didn’t move away.

As the tips of their tongues met, his finely honed reason vanished. Something hot was forming deep in his body. He shifted his weight over her. *Hard to breathe*, he thought, *Gotta stop for just a second...*

Their eyes met.

Is she afraid? he wondered. *But she’s not running away...*

Isuzu wrapped her arms around him. She wasn’t refusing him; she wasn’t stopping. Their lips met again, this time, harder and greedier.

“W... Wait...” Isuzu said then, her voice pained.

Telling me to wait? Seiya thought plaintively, *Now?*

“It’s too... cramped here...” she panted.

It was indeed hard to move on the sofa. Seiya nodded silently, and pulled her with him; she didn’t resist. She stood up, then lay down on the bed as instructed. On that big, soft bed... His vision had finally adjusted to the dark,

and he could see her eyes now, wet with tears.

“Mm...” They kissed a third time, and Isuzu let out a girlish murmur. He’d never heard her make a noise like that before. He wanted to hear more.

Isuzu’s bathrobe fell open; she was all but naked, now. Her voluptuous form, her soft, white, fragrant skin... She was trembling, just a bit. “I’m afraid...” she admitted.

“So am I,” he told her.

“What’s going to happen?”

“I don’t know.” Seiya undid the tie of her bathrobe and reached for her waist.

Just then, the Blackberry she had left to charge vibrated loudly. It was sitting on a glass table, which made the sound especially noisy.

With a gasp, Seiya and Isuzu snapped back to their senses. They didn’t even realize the sound was her smartphone buzzing, at first.

“Let it go,” Seiya urged.

“I... I can’t,” Isuzu said with a sigh.

“Why not?”

“It’s probably... Her Highness.” Latifah, she meant. The word was like an ice cube down the back of Seiya’s neck.

“She always calls me before she goes to bed,” Isuzu told him. “Can I... answer it?”

“Y-Yeah...”

Isuzu hesitantly sat up, closing her bathrobe, and hurried to the charging station. But it seemed she didn’t make it in time, because the call vibrations stopped. “She hung up.”

“.....” Seiya didn’t reply.

“Can I... call her back?” Isuzu suggested tentatively.

“Sure.”

“I’m sorry.” Isuzu dialed back on her smartphone, and the other side picked

up immediately. It was Latifah's voice; the soundproofing in the room meant Seiya could identify that much, even if he couldn't make out her words.

"Your Highness... forgive me," said Isuzu, apologizing for not having picked up the first time. He could vaguely hear the princess's girlish, cheerful voice on the other end. She said something.

"Yes. We found a nice... bed and breakfast," Isuzu responded.

Latifah said something.

"Yes, we'll be back tomorrow... There's no need to worry."

Latifah's voice, unintelligible.

"Of course," said Isuzu. "Take care of yourself."

Latifah's voice.

"Yes. I'll tell him."

Latifah's voice.

"Goodbye."

Latifah's voice.

Isuzu hung up, and the smartphone went silent.

"....." Seiya still didn't know what to say.

It was over. Isuzu stepped back uneasily, and sat down on the edge of the bed. Suddenly, there was distance between them—moments ago, there had been none; now, she was a million kilometers away. It was almost impossible to believe what they had been doing just seconds ago.

"I lied to the princess," Isuzu realized.

"About where we're staying?" Seiya asked.

"Yes."

"But it's not like you could have told her the truth..." he told her. Besides, whatever she called it, they were still spending the night together. Latifah wouldn't find anything suspicious about it.

"Yes, but..." Isuzu turned her eyes down, and then let out a lengthy sigh. "I'm

a terrible royal guard...”

“That has nothing to do with this,” Seiya argued back.

“...and I’m a terrible secretary,” she finished.

“Neither does that.” But hearing her talk about her positions like this, a part of Seiya knew for certain... *Yeah. It’s over for the night.*

That was that. He was well aware of Isuzu’s earnestness in duty—her duty to Latifah; her duty to Seiya. When seen from that standpoint, this situation was inappropriate.

He felt the same way. *The minute I heard Latifah’s name, I knew I couldn’t go any further. She’s such a nice girl, and she loves me. She wouldn’t even be mad if she found out what we were doing; she’d mask her sorrow and congratulate us.* But just imagining that brought a huge wave of guilt rushing over him.

“I’m sorry,” she sighed. “Let’s write off what happened as an accident.”

“An accident?” Seiya repeated.

“Yes. An accident.”

Of course, he thought, an accident. That was basically how it started, anyway... Maybe it was best to think of it in those terms. “Yeah... I know what you mean,” he agreed. “After all... fidelity is the most important thing to both of us, right?” Seiya said.

“Seiya-kun...”

“I lost my head, too. Sorry.” But despite his words, Seiya’s mind swirled with complaints. Specifically: *Come on, I’m not even dating Latifah! It’s not like this would be cheating on her! And is that all it meant to you?! Is this as far as you were willing to go when you let me kiss you?! Don’t give me that ‘just a spur-of-the-moment thing’ crap! Do you like me or not? Just tell me! It’s so damned hard to understand your reactions!!* But to shout that at her now would be too pathetic; it would ruin his cool-headed(?) image. So, of course, he didn’t.

Though to be perfectly honest, I want to keep going! he thought in frustration. *I want to lose my mind with pleasure! I’m still a healthy young man, you know! You can’t make those girlish squeals, set my balls on fire, then leave me like this!*

What am I supposed to do now?! Just take a cold shower and wait until morning?! After seeing all that... dammit, everything?! Sento Isuzu! Are you trying to kill me?! But if Seiya said those things, he'd lose any chance of a relationship with her, so he endured it. He swallowed it down.

"No, I'm sorry," Isuzu said.

"Mm..."

"Let's just go to sleep," she mumbled, returning to the sofa and curling up in her sheet. She looked like she was determined to stay there, after all; the only difference from before was that now, she was facing away. The gesture felt simultaneously like rejection, and like pouting. Seiya couldn't know for sure which one it really was.

Left with no other choice, he'd gone to sleep in the bed, when he heard Isuzu whisper, "Seiya-kun..."

"What?" he asked shortly.

"I love the princess."

"I know."

"But you love her more," she said wistfully.

"....." Seiya didn't know what to say.

"You don't have to respond," Isuzu told him. Her tone was indifferent, quiet, and relaxed, just like it had been the first time they met. "I just wanted to say it. Good night."

But Seiya knew that Isuzu was a soldier. That kind of calm always came to her only during the most dangerous, anxiety-ridden times.

5: Nick of Time

Seiya was staying in an unfamiliar bed, with an unfamiliar pillow, and he'd just had a rough night. He could usually sleep almost anywhere, but this time, he only managed to spend about three hours in a light doze.

They had room service for breakfast, too. Isuzu munched on her toast as if nothing had happened, made full use of the jacuzzi bath she'd filled up during the meal, and then tidied up. "I'm ready," she announced.

"Okay."

"Shall we?"

"...Sure," Seiya agreed. He paid the final room fee and the two left the hotel. It was sunny outside; the morning light was almost blinding. At the same time, it seemed to Seiya that the sun was a little bit dimmer today.

He watched Isuzu from behind as they walked to the closest bus stop, bathed in the still-intense light of September. His head was fuzzy from sleep deprivation, and the events of last night almost seemed like a dream. Seiya wondered if they were never going to talk about that night again... and the thought filled him with dissatisfaction.

The bus came. They silently got on board. There were only four or five others there. Seiya took a seat in the back, and Isuzu sat in front of him. She was acting distant—no, was she lonely? He didn't know for sure which one it was.

The bus was nearly empty, yet something inside him told him that they couldn't keep sitting in separate seats like this. He felt something like a premonition—difficult to put into words—that things might stay this way forever if they did. Was this one of those times when you had to fight the urge to run away? Why not just move forward instead?

If he didn't make any progress at all, he'd eventually lose everything, so Seiya stood up and then sat down next to Isuzu. "Scoot in," he ordered, shoving her shoulder with a little intentional roughness.

Though surprised, she obediently let him push her to the window seat.

“There’s not much room,” she cautioned.

“So what? We’ll be fine,” Seiya said coldly, turning away.

“...You’re strange,” she commented.

“Hmph,” he grumbled. Each time the bus rocked, their arms touched. It felt nice.

It took about ten minutes to reach Sanami Lake Station. It was only about 10:00 in the morning; if they got on the next train, they could make it in time for their morning conference.

Around the time the bus entered the station, Seiya got a call from Handa-san at Kagaya Estates. He apologized about the trouble yesterday, and she did the same. This was only natural— she had basically abandoned a customer deep in the mountains, after all. “I am so sorry!” she boomed. “Did you make it out safely?!”

“Well, yes... We made it in time for the last train out,” Seiya answered, turning down the smartphone’s volume as he got off the bus.

“Great to hear it! The only places to stay around there are love hotels! Ahaha!”

“I... I see,” he agreed neutrally. *She really is an exhausting person...* he thought. Of course, she obviously didn’t mean any harm.

“So, how did you like the property?” Handa-san asked. “Did you get a good look around?!”

“Well... I’ll need to bring it back to my company, then go over the conditions again. I’ll need to negotiate with the local government, too. But... personally, I don’t think I’m going to find a better offer,” Seiya admitted.

Isuzu’s eyes went wide as she heard his words.

“Great to hear it! Ahaha!”

“But... there appears to be a squatter on the land,” he continued, “so I’d like you to do something about that, first.”

“A squatter? On *that* land?” Handa-san repeated, confused.

“Yes,” Seiya told her. “An old man, growing crops among the ruins. He looked like he’d been living there for years.”

“I... I don’t think that’s really possible?” Handa-san questioned. “The maintenance company sends regular patrols, so if there were someone there, they’d have noticed right away!”

“But I saw it,” Seiya insisted.

“Not possible! Just not possible! Ahaha!” Handa-san said confidently.

“Hmm...”

“You were probably just tired! Ahaha! You should eat more vegetables! Vegetables! They’re good! Vegetables!”

“Ah-ha...” Seiya said, unsure of how to reply in the face of such strident optimism.

“Well, I’ll call back later! Ahaha! Gotta go now!”

The moment he hung up, Isuzu spoke. “Have you decided to take the land?”

“I think so...” Seiya said. “Another real estate agent sent some proposals too, but... this seems like the best we’re going to get.”

“I see...”

“You don’t like that?”

“No. You’re right about everything,” Isuzu told him. “Three million attendance is impossible; moving is the only alternative.”

“That’s right.”

“But it still frustrates me,” she sighed. “It feels like running away.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Seiya told her bluntly.

“Of course,” Isuzu dutifully agreed again.

Frustrates me—like running away. Her words lingered for a while in Seiya’s ears. Still, there was nothing else to be done. Everyone in the park had worked their hardest, and they’d already exceeded last year’s total attendance. Their growth was miraculous by any standard, but it wasn’t enough.

No matter how he struggled, 2.5 million was the most they'd get by next March. And even that would be difficult to reach. Their projections left no doubt whatsoever. It wasn't a question of popularity but of physics; they simply couldn't accommodate any more guests. It was impossible.

That's why he'd come to his conclusion: EXODUS. They had to move. They had to run. They had to get away from Amagi City.

"It'll be hard at first," Seiya told her. "But down the line, I think we'll see the move as a positive thing."

"Of course..." Isuzu trailed off.

"I'm sure everyone will understand. 'Running away' has a bad ring to it, but..."

"...Evacuation?" Isuzu suggested.

"Pretty much. There's no point in fighting a war we can't win. I mean..." Seiya went on. "Fight? Why should we? It's exhausting. I'm sick of it."

"....." Isuzu said nothing.

"Let's just take it easy, take life as it comes," he said. "I shouldn't have to torture myself so that other people can have fun."

"I... suppose."

"I've had enough desperation," Seiya finished.

They entered the empty station and looked at the timetable; the next train looked like it would arrive in five minutes. They passed through the ticket gate and stepped onto the platform.

Let's go right home, he thought. I'm so exhausted... The events of the night before felt like a distant dream. How had things even turned out that way? It's probably what happened at the ruins that caused it. I chased that tapir, met that old man... Then somehow, time leaped forward, the sun was on the horizon... we got lost and ended up staying at the love hotel...

That old man; Seiya just couldn't get his head around it. Handa-san had to be right. She had explained yesterday, too, that maintenance company staff came through once a month. There couldn't be a homeless man staying there, tending crops. And two days ago, when Seiya had done research on an urban

explorer site, he'd seen nothing written there about that old man, either.

An announcement came over the platform: the inbound train had arrived. His mind still burning with questions, Seiya got on board.

Can I really afford to go back like this? he wondered. Then he told himself, *Of course you can. Let's just go.*

No, something's wrong... he thought. And then, *Just go home, hold a meeting to announce the move, make the preparations, and go.*

But is that enough? he wondered. But afterwards, *Of course it is. You have your conclusion.*

Is this really my conclusion? his thoughts insisted. *I know it's not great, but you're tired of being tired, aren't you? It's time to go home. You want to take things easy from now on. You're sick of dealing with all of this nonsense.*

Am I really? he wondered, second-guessing himself yet again. *Yes, you are. Thinking and making decisions for yourself is exhausting. You want to end it already.*

Do I really? Really?

.....

The next thing he knew, Seiya had jumped from the train back onto the platform.

"Seiya-kun?!" Isuzu, still on board, pressed herself against the doors in surprise.

"Isuzu!" he shouted back. "Go back without me!"

"What?!"

"I need to take one last look at that place!" he hollered. The train pulled away and Isuzu receded into the distance. He thought she might be mad about his impulsiveness, but it seemed she wasn't. For some reason, her face was flushed. "What's with her?" he wondered. The train continued its departure, and soon left his sight.

He was just walking the steps back up to the ticket gate when his smartphone

rang. It was Isuzu. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“Just what I said,” he told her. “I need to have another look at those ruins.”

“I’ll join you,” she said. “Wait for me at the station; I’ll turn back now.”

“No, you should go back without me,” Seiya insisted. “Lead the project meeting.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry. This time, I’ll make it back by noon.”

“...Very well,” she agreed reluctantly. “But don’t go anywhere dangerous. And... contact me when you’re in a place with reception, even if it’s just a one-word message.”

“Sure thing,” he promised. “Okay, talk to you later.” Something was there. He had to investigate. *That’s right*, he told himself. *Let’s get moving*. Seiya hung up and then strode through the ticket gate.

Ding-dong. The ticket gate snapped shut on him and nearly sent him tumbling forward.

He got out of the taxi he’d hailed at the station. The gate to old Sanami Amusement Park stood open for him. That was as expected—they’d left it that way when they’d come out the night before. Normally he’d let Handa-san know he was going in, but knowing it would just complicate things, Seiya opted against it. There was no way she would give him the chance to just roam around, the way he needed to.

The driver asked if he should wait, but Seiya sent him away; he’d spent enough money, and he could call another taxi to the entrance later if he needed to. There shouldn’t be any danger of running out of battery this time—he’d bought a spare battery at a convenience store at the station. A two-pack, in fact! Kanie Seiya was nothing if not prepared.

Still, he thought, he should probably let her know... The signal in the area was weak, which was the reason they’d had such trouble yesterday. Nevertheless, he sent Isuzu a message saying, “I’m at the front gate now. I’m going in.”

Seiya strode quickly into the ruins, after realizing it was silly to wait for a

reply. Everything looked just the same as yesterday. He headed for the hall of mirrors, where they'd gotten separated before. He didn't trust his memory, but at least the building was there—he wasn't wearing his safety helmet now, and it seemed excessively dangerous to go in without it, so he went right around to the back.

There was nothing there. It wasn't like in his memory. Yesterday, he had walked straight out and come to the old man's farm, but now there was nothing but ruins around him.

Nothing... no signs of a makeshift lodging. No bucket of water with bugs floating in it. No room full of old books. No hamster cage. The trashed old stage where the old man had performed wasn't there, either.

What's going on here? he wondered. *Was it all just a dream after all?* Just as Seiya was starting to doubt his senses, he caught sight of the tapir. It was right in the middle of the cracked asphalt that made up the path. It stood on its four legs, head tilted, looking straight at Seiya.

"You came, baku," the tapir said.

"What the..." Seiya started to ask.

"I was starting to think you'd leave last night without giving any more thought to yesterday's events... but you didn't, baku," the tapir observed. "I'm surprised, baku."

"What... did you say?" It was strange to see a tapir talking, but Seiya didn't reject the idea; he hung out with talking animals all the time.

The tapir stood up on its two hind legs. This wasn't too surprising either; Seiya hung out with anthropomorphic animals all the time, too.

The tapir had a watch on its arm: a Rolex. This *was* surprising. *How'd it get a Rolex?* Seiya wondered curiously. *Don't those cost about a million yen?*

"I am the Fairy of Time, Bacross." The fairy named Bacross bowed to him politely. "I was born in the magical realm of Polytear, baku. My special move is the Bacross Cannon. It's a super-powered beam that pierces the bacro sky."

"What are you talking about?" Seiya asked.

“It’s a joke, baku,” the tapir chuckled. “I don’t actually fire beams, baku.”

Is everyone from the magical realms like this? While Seiya fumed quietly with his usual rhetorical question, Bacross approached him. He didn’t hesitate to sniff at Seiya as he walked around him.

“Hey,” Seiya objected.

“Hmm, I thought so,” the tapir observed. “You’ve got some powerful mana in you.”

“You can tell that?”

“Sort of,” the tapir hedged.

Seiya had been given “royal magic” by Latifah, the princess of Maple Land. He didn’t really know how it worked, but it appeared to be very powerful. He still wasn’t quite sure what “mana” referred to, but he figured it was a bit like MP in a video game.

“When most people come to this amusement park, I usually give them simple dreams and that’s that, baku. But you have strong mana, so I got curious, baku.”

“A dream?” Seiya questioned. “You gave me that dream?”

“Well, I am a tapir,” Bacross pointed out.

“I thought tapirs ate dreams... nightmares and such,” Seiya mused. “And that’s only in folklore, anyway.”

“Some tapirs do that, baku, though they need a first-class Dream Handler’s license. I have a Special Major Dream Handler’s license, baku.”

“What’s the difference?” Seiya wanted to know.



“Only specialists need to know the difference. Don’t worry about it, baku.”

“Ahh.” It wasn’t worth pursuing every weird custom and law he heard about from the magical realms—Seiya had learned that well, over the past six months.

“I’m a Fairy of Time. I used to run a little fortune-telling corner here at Sanami Amusement Park, baku. Bacross’s Superdimensional Fortune-Telling Hut. It was very popular. Have you heard of it, baku?”

“Sorry,” Seiya said politely, “but no.”

“I see...” Bacross slumped over. “It’s my job to show visitors dreams about the future, baku. Just a tiny glimpse, of course... and only the good stuff, baku.”

“Hmm.”

“You know, like getting a good score on an upcoming test, going on a date with a girl you like, getting a game you wanted as a present... that sort of thing, baku. I make the customers feel good, and I get *animus* in return, so it’s win-win, baku.”

“I see,” Seiya said thoughtfully. “I think I get it.”

“Hmm. You’re quick on the uptake, I see. I suppose that’s why you’re AmaBri’s manager, baku.”

Seiya knitted his brow. “You know who I am?”

“It’s hard to explain,” the tapir told him. “You could say I’ve always known, or that I’ll learn someday. It’s also possible that later, I’ll never have known it, baku.”

“...?” Seiya was unsure of what to make of Bacross’s statement.

“I’m a Fairy of Time. I perceive the future and past as one, baku,” Bacross explained. “So even though, chronologically speaking, I might not yet have learned that you’re AmaBri’s manager, I may hear about it in the future, which means I already know it, baku.”

“Hmm...”

“Doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“No, I think I get it.” He wasn’t lying; Seiya really did comprehend what

Bacross was saying. He had contemplated, in the past, the mysteries of future dreams and premonitions. He'd had an experience like that when he was ten, and his paternal grandfather, in Kumamoto, had died of a sudden illness.

The day before, the grandfather had appeared in Seiya's dream, even though they hadn't seen each other in years, and he barely ever thought about the man. The grandfather had only said things like "Are you doing well?" and "I saw you on TV" and "Don't push yourself too hard," and then left. The next day, Seiya heard the news of his grandfather's death.

It was a fairly common story, and now he'd been through it himself. Before then, he'd always assumed such tales were just people's minds playing tricks on them, but he'd changed his tune after that. Though of course, he still didn't have his own explanation.

Several years later, then, when he was reading an article about Einstein, Seiya had remembered the dream about his grandfather. The article was explaining how the passage of time was really just a human construct, so if future and past existed simultaneously... couldn't it be possible that your consciousness in the near future could send (very important) information to yourself several hours in the past? Of course, the article didn't go into paranormal phenomenon like he'd been through; the thought had just occurred to him as he gazed at the simple illustration of the past, present and future tied together in a loop. That experience led him to ready acceptance of Bacross's story.

"You really are quick on the uptake," Bacross observed.

"Hm. I'm a man of exceptional intelligence," Seiya said with a cocky smile, brushing his bangs back with a slight movement of his fingers.

"That will speed things up, baku. It means you can get your future in order right away, baku."

"What?" Seiya blinked.

"You can do it, right? It's amazing, baku."

"W-Wait... I don't quite follow you there..."

"You don't, baku?"

“No.”

“Ohhh. You’re less impressive than I thought, baku.”

“.....” Holding back his irritation, Seiya forced himself to remain calm, and said to the tapir fairy: “It’s true that I can use something like magic. My brain also works faster than that of an average person. But I’m still just an ordinary mortal; I still need you to walk me through this so I can understand.”

“Ah, I see.” Bacross clapped his hands (well, forepaws) together. “All right... so what don’t you understand?”

“What did you mean about getting my future in order?” Seiya asked.

“Ah. What I mean is... your exceptional mana allows me to see a lot more of your distant future, baku.”

“...?” Seiya waited for the tapir to go on.

“I can’t see very far into most people’s futures,” Bacross confessed. “There’s too much that can throw it off: their surroundings; spur-of-the-moment decisions; and other elements. So when I ran my fortune-telling hut, I could only show my patrons their very short-term futures.”

“Hmm. Understandable,” Seiya commented.

“You do catch on quick, baku... but you have a very strong will, and incredible mana, too. That means you can be very purposeful in choosing your own future.”

“Oh?” *That’s good to hear, Seiya thought. He’s saying that the future of a brilliant man like me is always ensured.* “That sounds nice,” he said out loud. “Are you suggesting there’s some problem?”

“Your appearance yesterday caused me to see a future much more distant than what I usually do. It was an exceptional circumstance, baku.”

“Okay, but seriously,” Seiya said. “What’s the problem?” *That means my future success is assured. What’s wrong with that? There can’t be any problem with it.*

Bacross let out a sigh. “We seem to be talking past each other...”

“Are we?”

“I think you might actually be very stupid, baku.”

“Hey,” Seiya objected.

The Fairy of Time, Bacross, pulled an old-fashioned pocket-watch from nowhere in particular. “Wind the hands of the watch, baku.”

“...?”

“It will let you see the same future I do, baku. Start by turning it just a little—bits at a time, okay?”

“Hmm...” Seiya was worried that it might be some kind of trap. But there was nothing obviously malicious in Bacross’s behavior, so he took the pocket-watch and began to turn the dial protruding from the top. The hands of the watch moved. He did as he was told, moving it slowly at first.

And then instantly, the pathetic ruins surrounding them—“Old Sanami Amusement Park”—transformed into a shining theme park.

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Fireworks sang out against the April sunlight. A colorful banner strung across the entrance read, “Welcome to Sanami Brilliant Park!”

At 10:00 AM an alarm sounded out, and the crowd—a huge crowd—of guests swarmed through that shining new gate. People fought to be the first one in, and TV stations came to report on it.

The cast met the people with the exact same smiles from their Amagi City days. Moffle was there; so were Macaron and Tiramii. Elementario, too, greeted the guests with open arms.

The guests loved all their new attractions—magnificent structures, every bit as good as the ones they’d had in Amagi City. To build a park like this in such a short time—the new AmaBri was really something! So many smiles. So much *animus*. The cast was overjoyed.

The acting manager’s—i.e., Seiya’s—decision had been the correct one. Why hadn’t he just done this from the start? The plan to leave Amagi City had seemed a risky move, but this proved that he’d been right to do it!

The Mogute Clan had worked hard to build a new Maple Castle—more whimsical, beautiful, luxurious, all-digitized, and green-integrated—for Latifah to live in luxury. The first day’s massive attendance had energized her, too. The only issue was that she couldn’t make croquettes on a gas stove anymore; the stove was induction.

In the two weeks following, Sanami Brilliant Park hit record-setting attendance. The launch was perfect! Everyone was happy. It was a roaring success.

The only sour note was the fact that a few people, like Kenjuro and Kobory, who had been against the move from the start, couldn’t be with them. They’d managed to solve the Kenjuro problem by having the shark Jaw fill in for the dolphin, and they hired a new dancer to replace Kobory. She had long black hair and a similar look—she was also a much better dancer than Kobory.

Golden Week is on the way, Seiya thought. Let’s keep this train rolling!

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Guests continued to flood the park during summer vacation. They didn’t have a pool now, but there were still long lines at every attraction. The only trouble was the traffic getting into the park; the roads were narrow, accessibility was bad, and they had chronic parking issues. They’d been negotiating with the city for a road expansion, but that had gotten bogged down since the election of a new mayor. Still, the congestion issues would surely relieve themselves in September.

The mascots’ popularity was also on the rise. Moffle had finally been goaded into joining Twitter, where he’d proved surprisingly popular. He could be a little abusive sometimes, but that actually got him more attention.

The only sour note was that Salama had quit; she wasn’t getting along with the new Kobory, apparently. But they found a replacement right away—it wasn’t an issue.

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Understandably, attendance declined in the winter. Their distance from the city center made it hard for guests to just stop by on weekdays. Of course, they

held a big campaign for the Christmas season, and they pulled some good numbers from that. With a little improvisation, they managed to stay in the black—and since the new park didn't have any arbitrary attendance requirements, it was fine for them to remain “just popular enough.”

Starting in January, they decided to close the park for a few days a week—Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays—just to save money.

Latifah wasn't feeling well, and that had Seiya worried. But when spring returned, the customers would, too—it would all turn out fine.

Wanipii was set to quit at the end of December, but that probably wouldn't affect things much. Seiya never heard his reason for leaving.

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The park's one-year anniversary came!

They had sunk a lot of money into an anniversary campaign, and now that it was spring, they had plenty of guests. They didn't did pull the numbers they had the year before, but that was to be expected.

The greater problem was Rubrum—the red dragon racked up a huge food bill, but his attraction's numbers weren't justifying it. If his poor performance continued, they'd have to send him back to his magical realm.

Losing Sylphie was a big blow, too. She had gone to America; not as a dancer, but as a singer. Seiya found that odd, since he didn't think she was an especially good singer... but he wished her luck, regardless.

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Summer vacation of the second year came.

They weren't pulling as many customers as expected—word had gotten around about the traffic congestion problem, apparently. They weren't getting along with the local government, either, because they were getting frequent complaints from the locals. Staff members with complaints against them would just quit the minute they were filed.

Tiramii wanted to renovate his attraction, but his request was rejected. Where were they supposed to get the money for that, just a year and a half into

the park's opening?

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Winter of the second year came.

They worked hard for Christmas, but they only pulled in 80% of the previous year's attendance. Their limited schedule in winter came with a reduction of cast pay, which brought in complaints of its own. Macaron came to him to say, "We're not seasonal labor, ron!" But there was no point in opening and paying people to staff a park that no one was coming to. They just didn't have the money for it.

They'd used all the profits from their Amagi days on the move, and they hadn't made their investment back yet. Austerity was key right now. They were on the defensive. Seiya was making his calculations assuming they'd pull in about 500,000 guests a year.

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The third year came.

They didn't bother with a second anniversary campaign; Seiya calculated that standard attendance would be enough. Their second year's attendance had come to 480,000; it was just below their 500,000 goal. They managed, barely, to remain in the black, but he needed a way to raise their numbers.

He'd already asked the expensive Rubrum to quit, and Muse retired, as she was getting to be too old. Apparently, her parents had been working on an arranged marriage for her behind the scenes; it was all worked out now, and they wanted to bring her home to prepare for life as a housewife.

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The fourth year came.

Moffle suddenly fell ill, an issue caused by an overworked schedule, trying to drive enthusiasm for the park. Nobody knew when he would return. They could put fill-ins in costumes, but they knew that might cause another drop in popularity.

The attendance for the third year came to 450,000. They'd have to work really

hard in the upcoming year, or they'd fall into the red.

Maple Land issued orders for Isuzu to return. She refused, choosing to remain once and for all in the mortal realm. The two of them had officially been dating for three years now. Her support was the one thing keeping Seiya sane.

Latifah's health had declined further. Seiya was worried.

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The fifth year came.

Attendance held steady at 450,000. They continued to cope via austerity measures; they had lost a large number of their cast as well.

Moffle never returned; he'd passed away in one of Maple Land's hospitals. It was a major blow to everyone. Nobody told Latifah, choosing instead to let her believe that he was still in treatment, because her own condition had worsened further. She no longer felt well enough to stand. She couldn't make her famous croquettes anymore, so they had Croquette Saigo-tei ship them in, instead. Seiya was grateful for the owner's generosity.

Macaron retired, too. His daughter was in college now, and he couldn't support her with his current salary.

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The tenth year came.

They faced their tenth anniversary in a state of ongoing decline. They worked hard on a campaign to celebrate the occasion, but it never quite got off the ground after having lost Tiramii, Tricen, and several other major players over the last five years. Isuzu remained supportive, but sometimes lashed out at him.

Latifah was completely bedridden. She spent day after day in a state of hazy consciousness. It was hard to watch.

Their attendance that year was 120,000. It would be hard to remain in business like this.

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The fourteenth year came.

They filed for bankruptcy. Sanami Brilliant Park officially closed, and most of the land was sold off. Isuzu worked hard to make sure they could keep part of the land and a building (the old Music Theater), where they took care of Latifah.

Seiya spent his days drinking. He couldn't find the will to do anything else. He drank, and he performed for Latifah. She didn't respond. More drinking, more performing.

Isuzu went out into town to work, but she didn't say what she was doing. They hadn't even kissed in years.

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The twentieth year came.

Now and then, former cast members came by to see how they were doing; Seiya was grateful for the charity they brought, as well.

One night, Isuzu fell ill and was hospitalized. They had no money. He wanted to apply for welfare, but since he owned land, he couldn't.

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The twenty-fifth year came.

Isuzu had been in the hospital repeatedly, and finally passed away. He didn't even have the money to put up a gravestone. He buried her next to the Music Theater—it was probably illegal, but he didn't care.

While he plunged into despair, Latifah disappeared. The only thing left in her beat-up old bed was a blind hamster; it was probably the shadow of Latifah's former self.

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The thirtieth year came.

Seiya had been supporting himself all these years. He performed for the hamster, tilled a field, and raised crops.

Rumors must have started about it, because young people and urban explorers would come from time to time to see. He performed for them. Sometimes they beat him, but he didn't care. He needed *animus*. *Animus*...

His mind was growing foggy. He couldn't remember who he was anymore. There was a face, reflected in a pail of water with dead bugs floating in it. A grubby face with a ragged beard... almost like that old man...

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The vision granted by Bacross's watch ended there.

"....." Seiya collapsed onto the ground. He felt nauseous. He dry-heaved a few times, then gulped.

"Shocking, eh, baku? It made me a little sick too, baku."

"That was... me?" Seiya asked, horrified.

"Seems so, baku. And this is almost completely locked in, baku."

"That's ridiculous!" Seiya burst out. "That... that helplessness... I'm not that incompetent! This is ridiculous!"

Bacross slumped over as he yelled at him. "I don't know what you want me to say, baku. This future is yours, baku. It's the way it is because you chose for it to be that way."

"That can't be true," Seiya protested. "If the new park's business was that bad, I would have gotten out of there earlier."

"You think that now... but you don't know what you'd think years from now," Bacross pointed out. "Maybe there were other circumstances in play that the vision didn't show you."

"It can't be a money issue! If I put my magic on the task, I could turn around the entire Japanese economy!" That statement wasn't just a bluff; it might really be true. Seiya knew what his powers could do: he had the power to read the thoughts of others. He could also compel replies, and do this as many times as he wanted. He could read the mind of the Minister of Finance or the president of the Bank of Japan, if he wanted to. And even without going that far, he could make a killing in the stock market; he'd planned it all out, and was ready to put it into practice if the park's finances ever began to suffer.

For now, though, he hadn't used his magic to make money. It was strictly a matter of conscience and pride. Well... and one more thing.

“I don’t know the nature of your magic, baku,” Bacross told him. “But are you sure it’ll always be available to you?”

“I...” Seiya wasn’t sure what to say. Bacross was right; he had no guarantee that he’d be able to use his magic forever. Would it be with him all his life? Or would it be gone tomorrow? He had no way of knowing.

Seiya had asked Isuzu about it before, but the records didn’t offer much insight. Some lost their powers in just a few weeks, while others kept them for a decade or more. There were almost no cases of such magic remaining for life, though. It might even have a set number of uses...

That was a possibility he’d begun to consider lately. Ever since he’d learned that he could force people into responding, he’d started wondering if there might be some other price to his magic’s use. That was why he had grown more cautious about using his magic lately, and it was the other reason he wasn’t using his magic to make money. Of course, he fully intended to use it if he had to...

“It’s true that I don’t... know how long I’ll be able to use it,” Seiya admitted with some difficulty.

“Maybe it turns out that in the future, you can’t rely on your magic anymore, baku.”

“Even then, I wouldn’t be that stupid! If my business was failing, I’d take better care of things!” Seiya insisted. “I wouldn’t work Moffle to death! I’d go to work myself, and make sure that at least Latifah and Isuzu could live comfortably! If I couldn’t do that out here, I’d just move back to the city! It makes no sense!” He could just rent out a storefront in the city and open a club. He’d bring in people; they’d all be happy. He’d get lots of *animus* that way, too. He’d need just a few staff, but they’d run shows every day and the people would love it. That should be enough to keep Latifah in good health. Seiya had always filed that plan away as a last resort.

But Bacross spoke to Seiya with quiet eyes. “You really are a mortal, baku.”

“What?”

“Do you know what *animus* is, baku?”

“I think so,” Seiya replied. “It’s human feelings of joy, right? You fairy-types feed on that, and it sustains you.”

“Yes, but it’s not as simple as that, baku. There are many different kinds of *animus*. You know that?”

“Yeah, I know a little...” It seemed, at least, that there were many forms of joy: the joy of watching a love story and the joy of watching a horror movie were similar, but not identical.

“There are many kinds of *animus*, baku. As many kinds as there are nutritional elements like protein, carbohydrates, fat, minerals, vitamins, iron, and sodium in food, baku.”

“That makes sense,” Seiya said.

“Which means that there are also requirements to the *animus*—the nutrition, that is—which your princess needs. It’s the *ager* that you’ve been trying to keep in business that produces it, right? Which means...”

“.....” It was easy for Seiya to see what Bacross was getting at, and he felt a chill run up his spine. A club wouldn’t work; it had to be an amusement park. It had to be the joy of guests coming through the gate, seeing something truly wondrous, eyes going wide, crying out in joy. It had to be the kind of feeling that could make even a cynical young man—yes, a young man like Seiya—look up in awe when he entered. That’s what was needed.

He didn’t know what that feeling was, in terms of *animus*. Was it protein? Carbohydrates? Well, it didn’t matter... clubs, arcades, movie theaters, batting cages—those all brought joy, but they weren’t the same. The *animus* that Latifah needed had to come from an amusement park.

That’s why the old man stayed there, right? Seiya wondered. *Why he stuck around, helplessly locked into that future?* “No,” he denied out loud, continuing to argue. “That’s no reason why I’d spend decades just wandering aimlessly, without a plan! “I’d have tons of options! I could start another amusement park somewhere else! I’d find a way to get money, too! I’m an extremely resourceful person—”

“You are now, baku,” Bacross said in a voice that seemed to have aged

decades in an instant. “The seventeen year old Seiya. The Seiya who’s fine with only four hours of sleep. The Seiya who can easily grasp how new apps work. The Seiya who can eat convenience store meals daily with no adverse effects.”

“.....” Seiya hadn’t considered these factors.

“The Seiya who believes that no matter what happens, tomorrow can be better than today,” Bacross went on. “The Seiya with a sound body and mind, with a world that’s always been on his side, who has never known serious injury or illness... that Seiya.” There was no mockery in Bacross’s voice, and gradually, it came to sound as though he was reading from a script. “Some day, his powers, too, will decline. You don’t know how long you’ll be able to use your magic. And in time, you’ll lose all of the allies you’ve come to rely upon, baku.”

Seiya thought back on the “old timer” grumblings of Moffle and the others: they’d sleep all night and still wake up tired. They had a hard time memorizing a script. They couldn’t eat fatty things, like Korean barbecue, the way they used to... and other things. He’d dismissed it all as irrelevant to him assuming that they were just pathetic and inferior. But where was the guarantee that he wouldn’t end up that way, himself?

“There’s no way...” Seiya muttered, feeling sick. His head was swimming. He took a deep breath, but it didn’t help much; his breathing was still ragged.

Wait, wait, wait. That fairy, Bacross... could he actually be an agent of Kurisu —of the magician Idina? Seiya turned to Bacross and used his magic. “What... What are you planning?”

“Planning? What a rude question, baku.” At the same time, Bacross’s thoughts came to him: *I’m not planning anything, baku. I just don’t want to see tragedy repeat itself in the amusement park where I’ve made my home, baku.* It was Seiya’s first time using his magic on Bacross, so he didn’t lose any important memories about him.

“...Okay, I get it.” Seiya took another deep breath. He was starting to calm down a little. “Let’s assume... let’s just assume... that that was my real future. Is there any way to avoid that tragedy?”

“I don’t know,” Bacross admitted. “That’s the trouble, baku.”

“Now that I’ve seen the future,” Seiya asked, “can I use what I’ve learned to change it?”

“Normally, you could. That’s why I only show people dreams of the near future, baku. But you’re different. You might be able to change a lot of little details, but it’ll still come out more or less the same, baku.”

“What if I don’t move here? Will I avoid that future then?”

Bacross sadly shook his head. “You’d end up with a similar fate. Even if you don’t move, your amusement park will close some day. It’s going to close even if you find a new plot of land to move it to.”

Seiya remembered the email he’d gotten from the other real estate agent the other night; there were no other really good properties available. That dearth of options was the only reason Sanami Lake had even seemed acceptable. Taking one of the other candidates might end up driving them to an even more dismal fate.

“So, what should I do?” Seiya wondered.

“I’m telling you, I don’t know, baku.”

“Then why did you show this to me?”

“If someone was sick and didn’t realize it, you’d tell them, baku. I think your mana and my ability resonated, and caused a distant future I wouldn’t normally see to manifest, baku.”

“Is it set in stone?” Seiya wanted to know.

“The parts you’ve seen more or less are, baku.”

“More or less?”

“Yes. More or less.”

“Is that the... ‘you can make small changes’ kind of ‘more or less’?” Seiya asked.

“No, baku. It’s the ‘more or less’ that allows for different actions to lead to a totally different result, baku.”

“But then how—”

“I keep telling you, I don’t know, baku! You really are stupid, aren’t you?!”

Seiya didn’t have the energy for anger anymore, so instead, he folded his arms and racked his brain as hard as he could. He had no proof that this future was real. If Kurisu, otherwise known as Idina, could manipulate his own memories, then couldn’t he plant fake memories in Bacross, causing him to display a fake future?

Our enemies wouldn’t want us moving to Sanami Lake, after all, he reasoned. It wouldn’t be surprising to see them to try to stop us. On the other hand, what if this wasn’t one of Idina’s plots? That would increase the credibility of the future vision. The Seiya of six months ago—from a time before AmaBri—would dismiss it as being just a hallucination, but things were different now.

Seiya had just used his magic to learn Bacross’s motivation. He knew that the tapir wasn’t doing this to torment him, now, which also meant that he could put a certain degree of faith in Bacross’s explanation. Was it false? True? There was no way to be sure, right now—which meant he effectively knew nothing. The future vision was no help at all.

“You seem troubled, baku,” Bacross observed.

“..... I am. I also had a rough night last night, so I’m just really tired, anyway.”

“Was my aid unwelcome, baku?”

“Yeah... no. I don’t know.” Seiya heard a bell chiming nearby; it sounded like an alarm clock.

“Ahh. It’s time, baku.” Bacross, who had been sitting on a bench, now stood up.

“Time?” Seiya asked in confusion.

“Yeah. Time for my *monos*, baku.”

Seiya was shocked. “What did you say?”

“I’m part of the cast here at Sanami Amusement Park, baku. I stayed here even after it closed, baku,” Bacross explained. “I give dreams to the urban explorers and maintenance men who come here from time to time, and manage to get some *animus* that way, but I’m at the end of my rope, baku.”

“But... isn’t there something we can do? Come to my park,” Seiya offered.
“We can afford to hire one more person, and—”

“Thank you, baku. But if I could do that, I’d have gotten hired elsewhere a long time ago. I can’t leave this place, baku.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve made too many memories with the guests,” Bacross told him. “If I leave, I’ll disappear on the spot, baku.”

“Wait,” Seiya protested, “I don’t understand.”

“It’s what happens when we stay in a place for a long time, baku. We ‘take root,’ as you’d say.”

“That’s ridiculo—hey!”

Bacross’s form began turning translucent, and sparks of light began to shed off of him. “It’s okay. I made a lot of joyful memories, and I got to be useful one last time, baku. I have no regrets.”

“Hey! Wait! You need to—”

“I believe you can change your future, baku. Fight,” the tapir advised him.
“Don’t run.”

“Hey!”

“Bye-bye.” As Bacross faded away, his Rolex watch landed hard on the ground. That was the end. The amusement park was empty, and Seiya stood alone in its windswept ruins.

●

Despite his promise, Seiya hadn’t contacted Isuzu all day. By the time the sun was going down, she gave in, explained things privately to Moffle, and asked him to drive her out after the park closed. Even in one of the park’s company cars, they could make it to the site in a little over an hour.

As they drove down the Chuo Expressway at night, Moffle said, “We’re moving... to Sanami Lake, fumo?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “I’m sure you’ll be against it.”

“Well, actually... it might just be what we need, fumo.” Moffle’s response surprised her. “If that’s what he wants to do, I’ll go along with it, fumo. Not much else we can do, is there?”

“Yes... I agree with you,” Isuzu said.

“For now, we need to make sure Seiya’s okay, fumo. He still hasn’t contacted you?”

“No... Even though I told him to be careful. I’m worried...”

I really should have turned back and gone with him, Isuzu thought. If anything happened to him, I’ll regret it for the rest of my life. She hadn’t told Moffle about the previous night’s events. She’d fudged the timeline to say they made it back on the last train last night, and that Seiya had headed back for Sanami Lake that morning. She wasn’t sure if Moffle believed her lie or not; she had carelessly told Latifah they were spending the night there, after all. If Latifah had mentioned that fact to Moffle, Isuzu’s timeline would be proven false. *A careless mistake,* Isuzu thought mournfully.

“Moffu. That reminds me. Last night...”

Isuzu began to tremble. “Wh-What?”

“...? What’s wrong, fumo?”

“Nothing...” she told him awkwardly. “What about last night?”

“Right,” said Moffle. “Last night, I went to a mahjong parlor with Macaron, Tiramii, and Kodain, fumo.”

“I... I see.”

“Kodain’s a real hustler, see. You wouldn’t believe it. He cleaned us all out, fumo.”

Isuzu couldn’t imagine the statue-like Kodain even playing mahjong. “I was unaware that you played mahjong, Lord Moffle.”

“Just a little, fumo. Macaron’s awful at it. He’s awful, but he loves it, fumo. Tiramii is the type to step on land mines.”

“It’s still hard to imagine,” Isuzu said.

“Want to play with us next time? I’ll teach you, fumo.”

“No, thank you.”

“Thought not,” Moffle snickered.

Just then, Isuzu’s smartphone vibrated; it was a message from Seiya. 《I’m at the entrance to the ruins. Sorry to worry you,》 came the brief reply.

Epilogue

A few days later, they held a meeting between the various department heads. Seiya hadn't told them about the three million attendance requirement yet, but the executive-level cast seemed to have grasped an inkling of the situation. *There was probably some harsh condition affixed to the sale of the second park. That's the only reason Kanie-kun looks so depressed despite the numbers we're pulling,* they were probably thinking.

Rumors were starting to spread among the cast that backed up that theory. Even the three million attendance number came up from time to time. The rumors didn't seem to have originated from the park, so they must have come from someone at either Amagi Development or the Digima Group—at any rate, they had been started by someone outside of the park, for some purpose.

Of course, Seiya had known that this would come out some day. He was just glad it hadn't come out in August, when group morale was crucial; perhaps the cast members who'd heard the rumors had intentionally chosen not to speak about it, at that time. Then, after summer vacation was over, they'd relaxed a little, and become more loose-lipped.

"Are you going to tell them everything?" Isuzu asked Seiya on their way to the conference room.

"Yes," he responded. "There's little to be gained in hiding it, anymore. I need people to get ready to act." There was a tension behind Seiya's voice; his vaguely laissez-faire tone from the past week was completely gone.

When she'd gone with Moffle to pick up Seiya that night, he had appeared out of the dark ruins like a ghost, face gaunt and pale. He didn't meet her eyes, and his voice sounded hollow. Isuzu and Moffle were both worried about him, but he barely said a word. They ate at a family restaurant, then dropped Seiya off at home.

The next day, Seiya arrived at the park, looking completely rejuvenated. He looked in the mirror in his office and went through his usual ritual, telling himself "Yes, looking good today!" and such. With some uncertainty, Isuzu had

asked him what happened that day in the ruins. Seiya's expression saddened for a moment, and then he shrugged. "I saw a vision of hell."

"What?"

"I just... met someone else in the business," Seiya clarified. "I didn't get to know him long, but I've decided to believe his last words." On his left wrist, Seiya was wearing an expensive-looking watch.

Is that a Rolex? Isuzu wondered. *When did he buy that?*

"We need to stay on the attack," Seiya said. "I've thought of a way forward." The watch was still on his wrist as they headed for the conference room now.

Later on, Isuzu heard that, apparently, Seiya had withdrawn from managing the culture festival at school. He'd gotten a lot of blowback from his classmates over his abrupt withdrawal—rumors swirled around the school, even reaching Isuzu, who was in another class. (Incidentally, Isuzu's Whole Cucumber Yakisoba idea had been shot down in a heartbeat.) He was awful, they said. So irresponsible! He never should have offered if he was just going to drop out! But Seiya didn't care about the rumors; his focus now must be solely on the question of how to win. Isuzu started to wonder if he had even forgotten the night they shared together. It was a sad thought, but also reassuring. Well... more reassuring than sad.

The two of them entered the conference room. "Sorry for the wait! I will now explain the situation!" Seiya said, facing Moffle, Tricen, Ashe, Kenjuro, and the other department heads. Then, he started to explain the major points in play.

He came clean about the unreasonable three million attendance number. Then, just as morale seemed about to plummet, he said, "I'd been thinking about moving the park to get around it—that if we could get away from Amagi City, we could relax how we do things a little bit. I've been sent several candidates for the move."

The others looked uneasy. Where were they going to go? Would a move really be okay?

"There was one plot of land among the candidates that I think might just do the trick." Seiya stuck a blown-up copy of a piece of paper to the whiteboard

behind him, slamming the board as he did so. “We won’t be moving! But we *will* be buying up the remains of this old theater in the middle of Shibuya!”

Everyone’s eyes went wide. What could he be planning?

“We’ll make a second gate here!” Seiya went on confidently. “An AmaBri expansion! It’ll be indoors, so we can pack guests in, even during the winter! And it’ll be in the heart of the city, so we can rack up attendance even on weekdays! By my calculations, if we work our asses off, we can maybe bring in three or four hundred thousand!”

The entire group was shocked.

“Of course, we’ll keep running AmaBri at full tilt at the same time,” he went on. “By my current calculations, we’ll end March with 2.4 million. But what we need to do is get that to 2.6 million!”

Seiya wrote on the whiteboard. “ $2.6 + 0.4 = 3.$ ” He slapped the board with his hand. “So, that’s my plan! Any questions?!”

Hand after hand went up.

“K-Kanie-san... the math does work out, but... doesn’t the three million attendance apply only to this park, within Amagi City?” Tricen asked.

“The contract doesn’t actually specify,” Seiya responded. “It only says ‘Attendance to Amagi Brilliant Park, run by Maple Industries, Co, Ltd.’ In other words, as long as it’s an ‘Amagi Brilliant Park’ run by Maple Industries, we can put it wherever we want to! Those idiots slipped up, and we’re going to exploit their mistake!” Seiya cackled.

“Where will we get the money? This land in Shibuya... it’s four million per square meter,” Ashe said.

“We’ll borrow it, of course! That should bring us what we need! Get it out of Maple Bank!”

“That’s entirely reckless,” Ashe told him.

“Our successful past record should have earned us some leeway!” Seiya replied. “Moffle, you used to be a bigwig there, right? Throw your weight around for us! Issue a few threats! You were part of the invincible third division,

right? Have them run that coup of theirs! Do whatever it takes!”

“Moffu... I see. That might just work, fumo...”

“M-Moffle-san?!” Ashe was taken aback.

“You got an alternative?!” Moffle challenged her in reply.

Then Kenjuro spoke up. “Sir Kanie,” he began, “the attendance numbers thou invokest are the realm of pure fancy. 2.6 million and... 0.4 million? Dost thou have a plan to bring forth such a bounty?”

“That’s what we have to think about now!” Seiya told him. “Everybody, rack your brains!”

“But...”

“The autumn pool was a great idea,” he encouraged them. “We need more ideas just like that!”

“Sir!” they all responded.

“Any other questions?” There were no other questions. “Any objections?” The whole group was silent. “Then all in favor, please stand up,” Seiya invited, in his role as the meeting’s presider.

Everyone stood up. Of course, there was no guarantee they would succeed, but it was better than running away—that’s what the look in their eyes told him.

They didn’t know what troubles might lie ahead. They were just smiling, in a mix of fear and elation. Some were even grinning in expectation of a fight—Moffle and Ashe, in particular.

“Okay,” Seiya announced, “then it’s decided. Dismissed!”



Amagi High School Culture Festival!

Oh, hi there! I'm Bando Biino, a new part-timer at AmaBri, and also a member of their idol unit(?) Task Force ABC! I'm here, and I don't care what you think about it!

Sorry! Sorry! (Nah, I'm not sorry at all! I'm *doing* this!) Speaking of which, that name of mine! I know it's pretty weird, so you can call me Bean! And if that's too hard, you can call me B!

So anyway! What do you guys think of when you think of autumn?! Eating? Reading?! I'm not a big reader, so for me, it's about eating! And boy, have I been packing it in lately: chicken, ham, lamb steak, roast pork, and more! One great thing about all that meat is that it's low in calories!

The thing is, our family moved recently! We're now in a high-rise apartment, on the top floor, next to the Tama River! Thanks to all those nice AmaBri folks working together to get rid of my curse, my father got off his deathbed and went back to work, and things are going great so far! We're way better off now, money-wise! Even my mom, who divorced my dad before, came back! And my step-brother recovered from his mental illness and now he's studying abroad in America! I miss him, but I'm still okay!

Though actually, for some reason, I'm still getting hurt and bleeding as much as ever... I guess that was just my lot in life before the curse hit! But I don't mind! I heal as fast as a cheerleader in a certain American TV show! I don't scar, either! Thank you, God!

At any rate, I'm pretty happy with my life. And since things are getting so much better, I'm eating out with the family all the time, and I've put on an incredible three kilograms! If this keeps up, it might foul up my Task Force ABC work! And that's why I'm now on a diet! I guess that was a big conversational detour! I was just explaining why I was talking about low calorie meals! Isn't lamb great?!

Ah, um... what was I talking about again? That's right! I'm not really the brainy type, so for me, fall is about less reading, more eating!

That's right, we *were* talking about fall! Because there's one other thing fall is about, right? Culture festivals! My high school's culture festival is in November, but Amagi High School holds their culture festival (school festival? Whichever!) at the end of September.

Amagi High School! It's a prep school! It's also where my friend from work, Chujo Shiina, goes! Shiina-chan's amazing! She's so smart! And inspiring!

Also! Also! It's where Sento Isuzu-san goes. Amazing!

Also! Also! Naturally... inevitably? It's where our boss, the super handsome Kanie Seiya, goes! Amazing! Just amazing!

Anyway, that's the Amagi High School that's currently holding its culture festival! Shiina-chan invited me, Biino, to come and see! And on top of that... well. Our general manager and princess of a magical realm, Latifah Fleuranza, also asked if she could come along. So um, well...

See, the Amagi High School culture festival is on a weekend, and it's September, so the weather's still pretty warm, right? That means AmaBri is supposed to be putting 100% towards serving our guests on the weekends. It means Moffle-san and Macaron-san and Tiramii-san and the rest of the star cast have to be in the park, no questions asked!

Task Force ABC is also very in-demand, but our customers tend to come around later in the day, so we'll be fine as long as we aren't out too long. And since Shiina-chan and Isuzu-san had to help their classes... well, somehow, someone decided that I would be the best person to escort Latifah-sama to the Amagi High School culture festival! It's such an honor!

"Biino, I'm counting on you to keep Latifah safe," Moffle-san told me. "I'd like to go with you, but I can't be away from the park on a weekend, fumo. Isuzu can probably handle it, but if an enemy does mount an attack, you'll make sure you serve as a shield, won't you?"

What? I'd thought, beginning to panic. *Enemy? Shield?*

"Latifah is the princess of Maple Land, fumo," Moffle went on. "Terrorists could attack her at any moment. You're hardy and you recover quickly, so you probably won't die, fumo."

“Of course!” I told him. “I’ll give it everything I’ve got!”

“Maple Land will also give you a Pappara Heart for getting injured in the line of duty,” he promised.

“Really?! I can’t wait!”

“You’re such an optimist, Biino... I think you’ll do great things some day, fumo.”

“Yes!!” I cheered. “Thank you for the compliment!”

...So anyway, skipping to the morning of the big day! I came all the way to Maple Castle to find Latifah-sama already dressed, so I guess I kept her waiting... She was in an Amagi High School uniform! For the culture festival? Why?!

“You see... I have dearly longed to attend a school in the mortal realm. And as this seemed a perfect opportunity, I thought... I might also try the uniform,” Latifah-sama said, downcast and blushing. “Of course, ah... such an act might constitute impersonating a student, and thus be forbidden, but... the others agreed that on a culture festival day, it just might be allowable...”

Of course! I thought. That makes perfect sense! I hunch over in admiration! You’ve got my total support, then! Maybe I should’ve worn an Amagi High School uniform, too!

Latifah-sama was blind, so she couldn’t see the uniform in the mirror. But! Me and some others checked it over for her! I mean, it was just adjusting the angle of the tie and the wave of her hair and stuff, but still!

While we were messing around, Isuzu-san came by, also dressed in her school uniform. “I’m sorry for the delay,” she said. “Shall we?”

“Okay!” I agreed. Then me, Latifah-sama, and Isuzu-san all went out in a taxi. A taxi to school?! Such luxury!

Isuzu-san didn’t even bother to hide her musket. (It was a short-barreled carbine type with a Picatinny rail, laser sight and regular sight attached, along with a 40mm grenade launcher. Not sure that still qualifies as a musket, but okay!!) Inside the taxi, she remained alert to our surroundings at all times.

Fortunately, we suffered no enemy(?) attacks, and eventually arrived at Amagi High School!

Isuzu-san had signed up to work her class's exhibit the whole day on Sunday, so she didn't have to do anything at all today. That meant she'd be with Latifah-sama all day, which meant I probably wouldn't get my chance to be a meat shield. Too bad!

The Amagi High School culture festival was open for business! It was cool, too! Even the gate looked amazing! So big! So beautiful! I'd heard that their culture festival planning committee worked tirelessly to create it! A 'wow' escaped my lips, and Latifah-sama, who probably couldn't see the gate, said, with a sigh, "Is it wonderful?"

"Yes," I told her, "it's wonderful!"

"I see... I just knew that it would be..." Latifah-sama smiled brilliantly. Such a beautiful smile! It made all my troubles just float away!

Sniffle, I thought. *Latifah-sama is such a good person. I, Biino, shall dedicate my life to the princess, as well!* Also, the culture festival allowed Isuzu-san to carry her musket in plain sight and stick close to Latifah-sama's "five;" in other words, behind her and to the right! The passersby didn't even notice!

First, we went around the stalls in the courtyard area! Yakisoba, okonomiyaki, hot dogs, cotton candy! Yes, it was almost all food! So many good things made of sugar and fat! I'm on a diet, but today is a cheat day! It was all super good! Latifah-sama loved it, too! She ate and ate! Ate and ate! Put on weight! Put on weight! (That's what my grandmother in the country used to say to me!) By the way, I found Munakata Toji-kun working at the takoyaki stall! He's the manager of the Whip Antiques shop in Etceteland! Huh? He's not the manager, you say? Oh, I forgot! Toji-kun also goes to Amagi High School. Who knew? Maybe he's actually really smart!

"Hey, Toji-kun!" I said.

"Hey, Bando," he replied. "You came by, huh?"

"I'm a chaperon! See? Ta-daa! Make way for the princess!" Toji-kun was very surprised to see Latifah-sama there!

“Good day to you, Munakata-sama,” Latifah-sama said gracefully.

“Huh?! The princess?!” he gasped. “You sure you should be here?”

“Yes!” she declared. “I have absconded from the castle, just for today!”

“Absconded?” he repeated after her. Then Toji-kun’s eyes fell on Isuzu-san, who was standing right behind Latifah-sama, eyes scanning the surroundings. She was ready to kill anyone who tried to lay a hand on Latifah-sama! So, so cool!

“...Well, okay,” he said, all hesitant-like. “You want some takoyaki, Your Highness? It’s on the house.”

“It is?! That’s awesome!”

“Uh, I didn’t mean you, Bando... You have to pay,” he clarified.

“Aw, too bad!”

“Ah, Munakata-sama... as indebted as I am to your kindness, I cannot allow you to make exceptions for me...” the princess protested.

“Don’t be like that,” Toji-kun told her. “I think I owe you, given all the trouble Nyathan is always causing.”

“Trouble? Not at all...”

“C’mon, it’s my treat.” He paid 300 yen of his own into the register and held out a six-pack of takoyaki.

“Well, ah... I am honored by your kindness.” Latifah-sama gratefully accepted the gift. Incidentally, I paid my own 300 yen! “And if I might ask, is Kyoko-san with you today? I had heard that you were schoolmates...”

“We are,” he told her. “She’s in the shop. ...the one in the park, that is.”

“Ahh,” said Latifah-sama.

“We’ve been really busy with all the new customers lately,” he said. “We might need to work out proper shifts soon...” Just then, Toji-kun took out his smartphone. It was vibrating! Vibrating! He looked at the message and plunged into despair!

“Ah, those idiots!” he cursed.

“Whatever is the matter?” Latifah-sama asked in concern.

“They knocked over some stuff in the warehouse and buried Nyathan and Rabius,” he replied. “Darn it...”

“Gracious...”

“I could probably let it go if it was just Nyathan, but this isn’t good,” he sighed. “I’d better look in on them.”

“D-Do take care...” Latifah-sama told him.

“Sure thing. Anyway, take it easy and have fun!” Toji-kun took off his apron, told his classmate “fill in, okay?” and then left. Bad day for Toji-kun, I guess, but the takoyaki was tasty!

Even I was feeling full after all that, so we decided to put an end to the eating (finally), and headed into the school building.

“By the way, Isuzu-san?” I asked innocently.

“Yes?”

“You got all quiet in front of Toji-kun. What was that all about?”

“Did I? That wasn’t my intention at all...” she protested. “You may simply have imagined it.”

“Toji-kun didn’t talk much to you either, right?” I said next.

“Yes, now that you mention it... I wonder why.”

“You think he likes you?!”

“Certainly not,” she said stiffly. “I barely know him.” That was one fast denial! Hmm! I guess there’s no spark there after all? I thought it would be funny if Isuzu-san ended up in Toji-kun’s whole harem situation, but I guess it was off the table! Too bad!

Anyway, moving on! Inside the school, it seemed to be mostly literature-club-type stuff. I was worried Latifah-sama might not be able to enjoy them, but...

“I wish to see everything! I will enjoy the atmosphere alone!” she insisted.



The literature club exhibits! They honestly weren't that popular! It was kind of a wasteland! So we got a whole lot of lectures from bored club members with nothing better to do. We even got an hour-long explanation from the biology club folks over the reproductive cycle and mating rituals of the sloth! Latifah-sama seemed to listen with delight.

Of course, it was all way over my head! And Isuzu-san was standing watch, so she probably wasn't listening at all! People started really crowding around when they caught sight of the beautiful and exotic Latifah-sama, so that was probably really stressful for Isuzu-san!

We spent a lot of time in the biology club, and I was hungry again by the end of it! Wouldn't you be?!

"You've seemed overly preoccupied with eating today," Isuzu-san said.

"I fear I would struggle to take another bite..." Latifah winced, too.

Should I endure? Yes, endure! We looked around the in-school exhibits and came to the one for class 1-1. They were holding a flea market! Class 1-1 is also my comrade and super-duper best friend Shiina-chan's class! So we really had to stop by!

In a corner of the yard, there were all kinds of things lined up. I searched, and I found her! She was in front of a second-hand CD stall! "Shiina-chan!" I cheered.

"Wah?! Siino-ban?!" She was stunned! Stunned! It was adorable!

"We came to hang!" I told her. "Also, look at this! Make waaaay for the princess!"

"L-Latifah-sama?!" Shiina-chan stuttered. "A-Are you bore you should see here?"

"Hello there, Shiina-san," Latifah-sama greeted her. "I have absconded from the castle, especially for today!"

"A-A-Absconded... um, Isuzu-san?" Shiina said.

"Yes?"

“You’re m-m-maring see! D-Don’t goint your pun at me!” She opened with a complaint for the still deeply cautious Isuzu-san.

“I’m sorry,” Isuzu-san apologized. “I’m quite tense today.”

“I... I see...”

“What are you selling, Shiina-san?” Latifah-sama asked, and Shiina-chan straightened up immediately.

“Ma’am! I’m s-selling used CDs. The whole class brought CDs they don’t want from home...” There were all kinds, too! Hit songs from yesteryear, enka, jazz, movie soundtracks, kids’ tunes, anisong, all kinds of things! A real motherlode!

“As long as I am here, I simply must buy something,” Latifah-sama decided. “Might I ask for your recommendation?” Latifah-sama couldn’t see the jackets, so she couldn’t really browse. Still, she asked in such an elegant way! Wonderful! Brilliant!

“Huh? Y-You want me to choose?” Shiina-san stammered.

“Certainly,” Latifah-sama told her. “If it would not be too much trouble...”

“I will! I’ll choose! Um, um... umm...!” Shiina-chan was thinking hard! Thinking hard! Thinking hard! Then, she chose! “H-How about this one?!” The CD she held out was called “Topknot Heaven TV Historical Epic Collection.”

I read the title out loud, and Latifah tilted her head. “Topknot... Heaven?” she questioned.

“Th-The title is weird, but it’s full of great songs!” Shiina-san explained. “‘Ah, Life is Sorrow’ and stuff... oh, that’s from *Mito Komon*. And *Kogarashi Monjiro*, and *Zenigata Heiji*, and *Lone Wolf and Cub*! Oh, I know! Kami-sama, too!”

“Kami-sama?” the princess questioned.

“From *The Unfettered Shogun*! And *Oedo Untouchables* and *Ōoka Echizen* and *Three For the Kill*!” Shiina-san went on enthusiastically. “I really recommend them!”

“Th-Thank you very much,” Latifah-sama said, taken aback. “I shall listen to them upon my return.”

“Oh, and also... this! The BGM album for *Combat Mecha Xabungle*! It has the opening and ending by Kushida Akira-sama, of course! Oh, not the two songs by MIO, those are in volume two and I don’t have that one here,” Shiina-san chatted on, warming up to her subject. “Oh, but it has the subtitle theme! It really gives you that feeling like, ‘I will risk my life to live!’ and ‘Xabungle is mine, now’ and stuff when you hear it! It’s great!”

“I-I shall take that one as well,” Latifah-sama agreed graciously. “How much will this—”

“Oh, and that’s not all! This one! A Doobie Brothers album! It’s *The Captain and Me*, so it has that really famous song, ‘Long Train Runnin’! Oh, oh! And this album, ‘*Nature of a Sista*’! It’s rap, but it’s good, and it’s performed by the lady Latifah-sama was named a—”

“Chujo-san, please calm down,” Isuzu-san said, and Shiina-chan locked up in fright.

“S-Sorry...” she whimpered.

“You have no need to apologize. I was merely overwhelmed by your passion and knowledge.” Latifah-sama smiled brightly.

“It really is amazing! I only have my own CDs! And I never have a chance to listen to them!” I chimed in. My father’d had a lot of CDs, of course, but he’d sold them all during our period of poverty, after the curse struck! He’d sold his player, too, of course! And now that our lives have gotten better, we just hook up a smartphone to wireless speakers when we want to listen to music. That’s why there are hardly any CDs at all in the Biino household!

“W-Well, I have a lot of my father’s CDs...” Shiina-chan explained weakly. “He’d buy a lot of used CDs, and he had eclectic tastes... so there’s no consistency in genre. Sorry.”

“No, I find it a wonderful hobby,” Latifah-sama denied. “I would be delighted to hear more of it later.”

“O-Okay! Well... which one will you buy, then?”

“I shall take the four recommended.”

“What?! Th-Thank you! It’s 150 yen apiece, so 600 yen!” Shiina-chan bowed stiffly, and placed the four requested CDs into the bag.

Good for you, Shiina-chan! I thought, and I called out “Good luck!” as we went on our way.

As we left, I noticed a classmate had started talking to Shiina-chan. Shiina-chan was answering her like a normal person. It sounded like the classmate was saying ‘Nice job!’ and Shiina-chan was just wincing as if to say ‘No, I need to try to sell more...’ Interesting! Shiina-chan had had a lot of trouble in the past, but she seemed to be fitting in pretty well now! Of course, one little interaction didn’t tell the whole story. It’s just a thought that the scene inspired in my mind!

We looked around a lot of other places after that. It was past lunchtime now, so even more people were showing up. The place was just bustling! On the way, we passed by where the theater club was carrying some big props around. I had a little trouble when some plywood fell over and hit me right on the top of the head, but otherwise, I was just fine! It broke the skin, but that happens a lot, so no problem!

“That reminds me. What’s going on in Kanie-san’s class? They’re doing a cafe, right?” I asked, after the bleeding stopped.

Isuzu-san’s face took on a strange cast. “Actually... Seiya-kun asked us not to come,” she said.

“Not to come?” I questioned. “Why?”

“He didn’t say, though I believe I can guess... regardless, his words were, ‘You can come to the culture festival, but don’t come to my class.’”

Latifah-sama looked really sad about this. She probably really wanted to go to the cafe where Seiya-san was being a waiter.

“Is that all right, Latifah-sama?” Isuzu asked.

“Yes,” she said. “If Kanie-sama insists, then we must not go against his wishes. Regrettable though it may be...”

“Let’s go!” I exclaimed.

“Ah?” Latifah-sama and Isuzu-san both looked stunned.

“Just forget what he said!” I told them. “He’s probably just shy! He doesn’t want his suuuuper cool awesome manager self to be seen working a day job! That’s what I think! Am I right or what?!”

“But...”

“Let’s go!” I insisted. “The whole ‘don’t come’ thing was probably just posing! Come on! Come on!” At times like these, you had to take initiative! I took Latifah-sama’s hand and strode forward! We were on our way to class 2-4!

“Ah, Biino-san...” she said.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry! If he makes it a whole *thing*, you can throw me under the bus!” I suggested. “I don’t mind a bit!”

Isuzu-san followed, looking a bit lost. She wasn’t trying to stop me, though, and that meant it was okay to go! Let’s roll!

There it is! Class 2-4! They were doing a cafe! Kind of cliché, really! “Hello!” I said. Then I entered the classroom, bringing Latifah-sama along.

There he was! Kanie-san! He was dressed as a waiter with a bow tie! So cool! He was taking orders from some other customers (girls from other schools)! They were falling all over him!

“Kanie-san! We decided to drop by!”

“Um...” Kanie-san was at a loss for words. I guess he was surprised! But he went right back to his customer service smile, as he turned to address the guests. “...I beg your pardon. That was a cafe latte, a chai tea latte, and a chocolate gateau?” he asked. He seemed really at home there! Had he done work like this in the past?

Another waitress came to meet us. “Welcome,” she said. “Table for three?”

She was a short girl in glasses. Her name tag read “Mikasa.” She looked at Latifah-sama with just a little bit of suspicion... Since she was wearing the school uniform, she was probably trying to remember if she’d seen her at school before. I mean, she’s the kind of person you’d remember! I think a lot of people had been looking at her that way today! Mikasa-san guided us to a four-

person table by the window. Latifah-sama and Isuzu-san both looked very nervous.

“Come on, it’s fine! It’s just a normal cafe, see?” I thought maybe there would be some kind of punchline reveal, like that it was going to be a cross-dressing cafe! But it wasn’t!

“O-Of course...” Latifah-sama agreed.

“Kanie-san looks very handsome!” I exclaimed. “Clothes make the man, right? Isn’t that the saying?”

“Let us forget him and look at the menu,” Isuzu-san said, and did just that. There were about... twenty kinds of drinks? It was a lot, anyway. They must have worked really hard!

“Your Highness,” she said. “Would you care for some tea?”

“Certainly,” Latifah-sama agreed.

“They seem to have chamomile, chai latte, and Darjeeling...” Isuzu-chan told her, reading off the list.

“Darjeeling, if you please.”

“Bando-san,” she said next, “what about you?”

“Hmm... I think I’ll have a cafe latte. And a slice of cheesecake!” I held up my hand, and Kanie-san came over.

He looked pretty upset. “I told you not to come...” That was the first thing he said! What a mean jerk!

Latifah-sama looked very apologetic. “Kanie-sama, you must forgive me. I simply... wanted to come, so very much...”

“Fine, it’s fine,” he sighed reluctantly. “Biino dragged you along, right?”

“Brilliant deduction!” I agreed cheerily. “But it’s no big deal, right?”

“Wrong,” he told me flatly.

“Don’t be like that!” I protested. “It’s not like we’re gonna make any trouble!”

“Er... Kanie-sama... Perhaps we should go...” Latifah-sama looked awkward

and started to stand up, but Kanie-san quickly stopped her.

“Ah, it’s... it’s fine. You haven’t done anything wrong, Latifah.”

“But...”

“Don’t worry about it,” he told her. “I’m complaining to Isuzu.”

“Of course,” Isuzu agreed sourly. “I don’t expect any special consideration.”

“Hmph,” said Kanie-san. “Just have your drinks and get out.”

Then, remembering his job for the day, he continued. “So, what did you want?”

Isuzu-san put in their order, and Kanie-san sulkily wrote it down. ...Huh? That conversation before... There was something off about it. What did Kanie-san just call Isuzu-san?



After finishing their order, Kanie-san whispered “You look good” to Latifah-sama. He was probably talking about her uniform, but it was enough to turn Latifah-sama red as a beet. She looked like she might melt, actually! Isuzu-san was just looking out the window, as though she hadn’t heard.

Hmm... What’s all this now?! Had I stumbled into an extremely delicate situation?! I wasn’t sure! Was it okay for me to be here?! But I wanted my cheesecake, so I boldly remained! I mean, hunger is a motivator, right? Come to me, cheesecake...

Just then, I heard a voice from the kitchen in the back. Kanie-san read out our order, I guess to the person in charge of making the drinks.

No reply came.

Kanie-san read out the order again.

“Huh? Sorry, I wasn’t listening,” the person in the kitchen said.

Kanie-san read it out one more time, patiently.

“I get it already. Just try to speak more clearly next time, okay? I couldn’t hear you.”

“Sorry,” Kanie-san apologized politely.

“Also, stop flirting with the customers,” said the voice in the back. “It’s annoying.”

“Right...”

That was the end of the conversation. Stuff like that usually goes over my head, but even I could read the mood there. Latifah-sama was looking pretty upset, too. She was blind, after all—if I could hear the exchange, it was probably plain as day to her! Isuzu-san also looked sad about it, but she’d probably figured this would happen, because she didn’t look too surprised, either. If we were doing manga thought balloons, hers would probably have read, “I thought so...”

While we were waiting for our drinks to come out, we saw a couple of scenes play out that were pretty similar to that one. It was actually pretty obvious, now that I was looking for it; Kanie-san was being cold-shouldered, ignored, and

snarked at by everyone.

Even the waitress, Mikasa, was doing it. She kept shooting little snide comments at him. I couldn't quite make them out from where I was sitting, but judging from their expressions, they were probably all nasty.

Speaking of which... the mood in the cafe was totally in the pits now. Even the girls from the other school, who had been smiling minutes ago while they ordered from Kanie-san, had gone pretty quiet. They just sipped their tea silently, and then shared a look as if to say, "let's go."

It was obvious. Definitely plain to see. Even though it was just a part-time job, I was really working hard at AmaBri, and working there had taught me how easily customers picked up on a negative atmosphere. Any time me, Eiko-san, or Shiina-chan were having personal problems, the audience seemed to enjoy our performances less. The people at the old folks' homes and daycare centers would still clap and cheer for us... but it felt like they were forcing it a little bit.

That happened at Elementario's shows, too. When Muse-san and Salama-san were fighting, you could hear just a little less enthusiasm in their audiences' cheers (I watch them from the back row a lot, actually! It's very educational! I don't think they realize it, though!)

The class's cafe was pretty well put together. They'd worked hard on the menus, and they'd made pretty good decorations for the limited time they'd had. (Of course, if they'd had more time, they probably could have made them even better...). You wouldn't notice the invisible pressure on Kanie-san if you weren't paying close attention... but you could still tell.

I wonder what the heck happened! Obviously, I didn't have any knowledge of the situation. Latifah-sama probably didn't, either, but Isuzu-san seemed to have a pretty good idea.

Now I knew why Kanie-san had told us not to come. He was a smart person, so he'd probably known that this would happen from the start.

Latifah-sama and Isuzu-san were both silent. Was it because I wasn't talking? It kind of looked like they were in pain. After a little while, Kanie-san brought the tea and snacks. I finally got my cheesecake, but I couldn't enjoy it a bit.

“Ah, well... I guess you saw me at my lowest, eh?” Kanie-san said, with a pained smile. “I just have to put up with it for two days. Then I can get back to work, so don’t worry.”

“Kanie-sama...” Latifah-sama said. Her voice was choked with tears. “Is this because of Shibuya? Because of Shibuya, you had to cancel all your plans here? And then the people in your class...”

“Ahh, I don’t care what these losers think,” Kanie-san scoffed. “Forget ’em.”

“But...!”

“Listen, Latifah. I don’t care about this play-acting nonsense, and getting wrapped up in some school drama would be a lot more annoying,” Seiya said flatly. “So I’ve decided to allot just a few days of my precious time here—but I knew you’d worry, which is why I told you not to come. That’s all it is.” His voice was quiet, but forceful. He’d also raised his voice just enough to make sure everyone heard him say “play-acting nonsense.” Very bold! But kind of rude...

“But... really...” she said.

“Just accept it already,” he told her. “I’m serious, okay?”

Latifah was trembling. The others could see it, too. It was like she was ashamed by her own lack of similar commitment. I didn’t really get it, but in that moment, Kanie-san looked kind, and fierce, and somehow very... very strong and cool. Oh, wow. I might be falling for him, too. Forgive me, my brother in another country!

It was the face of a man about to fight! It was 500 times cooler than Tiramii-san when he pressed the trigger for the explosives on that evil spirit! (Of course, that was pretty cool too!) What the heck! I wished I could take a picture and show it to everyone in the cast! *Everyone! Everyone! There’s a real hottie here! Look! Look!* I’d say. But I knew that if I took out my smartphone and got a picture, he’d get mad, so I didn’t.

“I will save you,” Kanie-san said. “But for today, just enjoy yourself. In two days, the real fight begins.”

“All right. Please... forgive me...” Latifah-sama was working hard to hold in her tears. Isuzu-san’s eyes were getting a little puffy, too. She was looking out the

window, pretending not to notice, but it was totally obvious anyway.

The people in the cafe didn't seem to know what to do about the impressive mood between the blind blonde and the handsome boy. But, hmm... as an ordinary person myself, I could imagine what they were feeling.

They probably found it extraordinary. I couldn't hear the conversations around me, but the mood seemed to have changed to "I don't know what's going on, but there are clearly some big stakes there." It wasn't quite the same as when you see a couple fighting in a restaurant, though...

It was there for that Mikasa-san girl, and the guy in the kitchen area, who'd sneaked out to catch a glimpse. Everyone in the whole room was looking at those two. Their gazes weren't scornful, either.

Isuzu-san and Latifah-sama didn't seem to notice the change, but I did. We forced ourselves to look cheerful as we drank our tea. Then we paid the bill on the way out.

Mikasa-san, who was handling the register, handed Latifah-sama her change. "Thank you for coming," she said in a businesslike tone.

But Latifah-sama suddenly took Mikasa-san's hands and said, "No, it is I who must thank you."

"Huh?" Mikasa-san was stunned.

"Kanie-sama devotes himself to my cause, day in and day out..." Latifah-sama went on. "I worry so about the trouble it must bring to those of class 2-4..."

"Ah..." Mikasa was caught off-guard by this earnest admission.

"Kanie-sama is a terribly faithful person," Latifah-sama went on. "If he has caused you any trouble, it is surely my own fault, so do not blame Kanie-sama, I beg of you..."

"U-Um..."

"I beg of you. I will do whatever is required..."

"Um, please..." Mikasa begged back. "You don't have to grovel..."

"Forgive me. I only insist that you not blame Kanie-sama."

“C-Cut it out...”

“Forgive me,” Latifah-sama cried again. “I do not know what else I can do...”

“Hey, Kanie-kun?!” Mikasa said nervously. “Do something about this girl!” Latifah-sama remained on all fours, begging forgiveness of Mikasa-san, until Kanie-san realized what was happening and came running.

Oh, boy! That was a pretty awkward scene, but we managed to enjoy the rest of the culture festival, which was uneventful.

I didn’t go in the next day, and I was busy with school and work for a while after. That’s why I didn’t have many chances to talk to Kanie-san, Isuzu-san, or Latifah-sama, and didn’t get to hear what happened after that. Even during our Task Force ABC pitch meetings, where I saw Kanie-san or Isuzu-san, I didn’t have the courage to ask what happened after that day at the culture festival.

It was Shiina-chan who finally revealed it to me! She was my good friend, after all, so during a break in a lesson, I asked her for the low-down on how Kanie-san was doing. This is what Shiina-chan said: “Did... did that happen? I went to the culture festival the second day, and I peeked in on Kanie-senpai’s cafe...”

“What happened?” I asked.

“Things seemed pretty comfortable?” she guessed.

“Was Kanie-san there?”

“He was,” she confirmed. “He was just working like normal. Um... how to put it. The waitress who looked like the manager, Misasa-san?”

“Mikasa-san?” I corrected.

“Yes, her! Mikasa-san. She was really nice to Kanie-senpai!”

“What?”

“She was kind of acting like she was worried he’d push himself too hard...” Shiina-san went on.

“Hmm...”

“The others were the same way. They were all ‘take a break, Kanie’ and such.”

“Hmm, hmm, hmm...”

“Kanie-senpai himself seemed kind of flustered about it,” she finished.

“Oh-ho...” I said. What a surprising revelation! I’m not very smart, so I spent a lot of time thinking about it after I went to bed that night. Could it be... could it be?

After Latifah-sama’s rather humiliating (sorry) display, everyone in his class realized “Kanie-kun has some kind of circumstances because of this girl”? Of course, I can’t be sure! Even I can tell that Latifah-sama is an extremely glamorous girl who can handle herself very well despite her blindness... but at the same time, I have to admit... in a place like that, a person like her, doing something like that... it would probably have a lot of impact. In other words, it was a lot more effective than a normal person, like me, trying to make a groveling request. Well, I guess ‘effective’ isn’t the nicest word for it...

Anyway, even if they didn’t figure it out immediately, I wonder if everyone in class was processing it, like at the very least it was like, “Huh? What’s going on?” They say that a person’s mood can change overnight. And that night, maybe the people in the class shared info over LINE and such, and more nice stories about Kanie-san came out... it could happen, right? Of course, I don’t think Latifah-sama planned it that way at the time. I think she was just expressing how she really felt! Sincerity can move heaven and earth. Isn’t that a saying? I’m not actually sure! But if that’s how it went down...

Hmm, sorry! I think I’m just getting lost in a fantasy! But if I’m right, then I think Latifah-sama really has something special!

Sincerity can move heaven and earth. I think it really is possible. I think I saw something truly wondrous go down that day.

That’s one extra reason I’m glad I went to the culture festival! I want to use sincerity in my current job to move heaven and earth too!

Anyway, thanks for joining me today!

(The End)

Brilliant Report (Apology Edition) Maple Industries Co, Ltd, Amagi Brilliant Park To: Acting Manager Kanie Seiya Sorcerer's Hill Cast Leader Moffle Mel Mosenas (Fairy of Sweets)

Letter of Apology On day X of month O, I negatively impacted the park's image by striking and injuring a guest, fumo. Sorry. My explanation of the circumstances is as follows, fumo:

1: How the incident occurred

Around 2:00 PM on day X of month O, I was doing my usual performance in Entrance Square when I saw a set of guests in possession of a particular piece of photographic paraphernalia. That is to say, a selfie stick. The guests were three women in their early twenties. (I guessed from their conversation that they were in college, fumo, as they kept talking about their 'friends from seminar.')

Official park policy doesn't forbid the use of selfie sticks, fumo. All we have is some fine print in the corner of the pamphlet that says, "Please use with caution during crowded periods."

But that Sunday, it was crowded, fumo. The three girls were completely hyperactive, swinging that selfie stick around while they took their pictures with me, fumo. They ended up whacking a young man, who was waiting in line with his girlfriend. It looked like it was the boy's first date with the girl, and as he likely didn't want to spoil their day off, he grinned and bore it and laughed it off awkwardly.

But these three girls didn't even say they were sorry, fumo. That's when my assistant Chujo Shiina stepped in and said to them, as roundabout as could be, "The park is very crowded right now, so we'd appreciate it if you could put your photographic aid away."

The girls got all offended by this, and started saying things like "Who is this kid?" and "You can't scold a customer!" They had Chujo in tears, fumo. Left

with no other choice, I squeaked my way in there, poked at the selfie stick and made a ‘you can’t do this, fumo’ gesture, fumo (since I can’t talk onstage).

The three of them started making faces and saying things like “Who do you think you are, rat?” and “He thinks he can play Mr. Nice Guy” and “We saw you lay out that delinquent daddy” and left, cackling to themselves.

Well, I endured it, of course. Because they’re customers, you know? But later that day, I found them swinging that selfie stick around again, fumo. They were doing it in Kenjuro’s area. No one else had gotten hit, but they were being a general nuisance, fumo.

Then two hours later, I saw the three of them around Sorcerer’s Hill. They were as hyperactive as ever, and being a nuisance to the other guests, fumo.

Then there was this kid—I think about two years old. The kid was sleeping in a stroller, and after they finished taking a picture, they whacked him with the selfie stick, fumo. As you’d expect, the kid started crying—just bawling his eyes out, fumo. Poor thing. They’d even left a scrape on him, fumo.

The mother was looking around like she didn’t know what to do. The father got angry and told them to be careful. But those girls didn’t apologize. They just went off with things like, “What’s with you, old timer?” and “Stay out of our way, okay?” and “Why don’t you worry about shutting your kid up?”

Well then, see... I’d reached my limit on irritation, see? I snatched that selfie stick from those girls and gave them each a little smack. Of course, I was holding back, so I didn’t even leave a mark or anything, but they still seemed embarrassed, fumo. That’s how it went down, more or less.

2: How I dealt with it and the aftereffects The three girls were furious, and insisted they would sue the park, fumo.

But when the acting manager—Kanie Seiya, who was called to deal with the situation—heard what went down, he gave them a talking-to, and they suddenly got really quiet, fumo. I had a feeling it wasn’t so much the lecture from the hot guy that did it, and more that he had some kind of blackmail material on them. I opted not to comment though, fumo. The acting manager seemed to resolve matters using some kind of magic or other, I suppose.

Afterwards, word of what happened at AmaBri got out to the rest of the world. For better or worse, another customer had recorded the events on his smartphone, from about the part where they hit the two-year-old, up until the point where I slapped them. It looks like it hit the 'net and just made me more popular, fumo.

Of course, some people have unkind things to say about me, but most of the reaction is positive. And the three troublemakers didn't say a word after that, fumo. Good thing we didn't have to deal with a lawsuit, fumo!

3: Reflections and plans for future improvement.

This is a letter of apology, right? So I'd better write down what I'm sorry for. I'm very sorry for losing my head and forgetting my place as the park's headliner mascot and extremely popular Fairy of Sweets. I'll be sure it never happens again. So sorry, so sorry (imagine me picking my nose as I say this).

Are you satisfied now, fumo? Now, as for how to keep this from happening in the future. If you ask me, it's this park's vague policies that led to this nonsense, fumo! The trouble is the weasel words about selfie sticks! The park (in other words, you, Seiya) has invited this chaos with its half-assed approach to the problem!

It's very clear that this is your fault! Just say 'Selfie sticks are banned'! Then the cast could say 'put it away' with confidence, fumo! It's not my fault at all, fumo! If I see another set of insensitive idiots like that, I'll hit them as many times as it takes, fumo! If you want to fire me, fire me!

You get it? You get it? Then take some action already, fumo! Even making me write this apology is stupid, fumo! Like I'm a child or something! You management types just do this so you can feel smart and superior! It took me two hours to write this nonsense, fumo! I've got better things to do, you know!

Die, you trash!

Acting manager's response to the apology I understand what you're trying to say. I agree that the ambiguity of the park's policies are what led to this incident. I'll correct the language immediately.

However. I've never seen an apology letter that contains the phrase "Die, you

trash!” I’m not even sure how this is an apology letter. You’re not sorry at all! And you should show a little appreciation for what I went through to resolve the situation peacefully, you sewer rat!

So I, too, want to say this: Die, you trash!

* * * * *

Maple Industries Co, Ltd, Amagi Brilliant Park To: Acting Manager Kanie Seiya
Sorcerer’s Hill Executive Leader Macaron Nam Secaron (Fairy of Music)

Letter of Apology

On day X of month O, I, Macaron, engaged in reckless driving in a backstage transport cart, injuring five people as a result. I am very sorry, ron.

1: How the incident occurred

People say it’s a lousy park, but AmaBri is still really big, ron. Many members of the cast use a bicycle or electric cart to move around the underground passages, you know? Everybody knows that, right, ron? But we mascots are too big to use bikes, and those electric carts are super slow, ron. It’d honestly be faster to jog sometimes, you know? People have been complaining about it for a while, ron. I mean, we got those electric carts 20 years ago during the bubble era, so they’re inefficient and slow. They need two hours of charging just to run for ten minutes, ron.

So one day, an old friend from my delinquent days came up to me and said, “Senpai, I just got a Chevy V8 engine in, you want it?” It was a super-powered turbo engine that came out of a Chevy Corvette, about 400 horsepower. How could I say no?

So I stripped all the unnecessary crap out of one of the park’s electric carts and replaced it with the 400 horsepower engine, ron. (Lots of trial-and-error here. It was rough work, ron!) 400 horsepower in a 300 kilogram machine! I knew it would be dynamite, ron!

So I took it right on a test drive down the underground passage! Of course, I was the driver! Start your engines! I peeled out like it was a drag race, ron. The

tires were smoking and I was sliding around like I was on ice, ron. It was super cool!

I think I juiced it up too much, though, because my turbocharged cart ended up driving right up the stairs and out into the onstage area, ron. I couldn't even stop it, ron.

It ran wild through Etceteland and hit five cast members there. Injured were Colonel Nyathan (fire chief at Whip Antiques), Munakata Toji-kun (part-timer at Whip Antiques), Tiramii (I don't know what he was doing there), Kodain (Etceteland's cast leader, who really went flying but seemed fine), and Mirai-kun (Astro City's area leader, who was probably skipping out on work). Two of them were sent to the park medical center and apparently given serious enemas, ron. I have no idea why they got enemas, but poor guys.

The one silver lining is that no guests were hit, ron.

2: How I dealt with it and the aftereffects My turbocharged cart was destroyed in the crash, ron. It also started a small fire, which I put out right away. The bathroom I crashed the cart into had to close for the day, which apparently caused extra crowding at the other bathrooms as a result, ron.

The cart I worked so hard to fix up ended up busted. The engine seemed fixable, but the whole frame was in ruins, ron. It was a sad situation, ron.

The cast involved in the accident were also useless all day, ron. Nyathan and Tiramii weren't big losses, but losing Toji-kun was a bad blow, ron. And the Whip Antique girls who love them some Toji-kun tried to kill me, which was also bad, ron. I had to spend the whole day on the run, and I didn't get to do any proper performances either, ron. It was horrible, ron!

Who even cares about that harem light novel protagonist (Toji-kun)? I'm far more important to the park than he is, ron. It's not fair!

3: Reflections and plans for future improvement

I am really, really sorry, ron. I was wrong to only improve the engine, ron. I should have added 20.5 inch rear wheels and switched the tires for ones with a better grip. I also should have elongated the body and widened the wheel base

by another 300 mm, ron.

I needed to really reinforce the chassis, too, ron. I wish I'd had some shaved aluminum composite parts to make it as light as possible. The drive shaft also got blown out immediately, so I'd need a thicker and more sturdy one, ron.

The suspension, too—the toy one in the park's carts just won't do the trick. I'll need to prepare and attach proper parts.

Fortunately, the engine itself was fine, so I'll make an even better vehicle next time. Look forward to it!

Acting manager's response to the apology
Do you even understand the purpose of a letter of apology? You're not sorry at all! The only regrets you have are about the way you modified the cart. Do you feel anything at all about the calamity you caused?

Besides, we don't want you improving the carts, and we didn't request those specs! It's ridiculous to use a gasoline engine in an underground passage in the first place! Did you even think of why they're electric?! You fool!

Just be aware that all the damages, including the lost cart, are coming out of your salary! I've already told the chief accountant, so it's too late to change it. Get ready for consequences!!

* * * * *

Maple Industries Co, Ltd, Amagi Brilliant Park To: Acting Manager Kanie Seiya
Sorcerer's Hill Chief Attraction Tiramii Zil Zevarmii (Fairy of Flowers)

Letter of Apology

On day X of month O, I brought a female guest backstage and got up to some mischief with her, mii. But it was a misunderstanding! Believe me, mii!

1: How the incident occurred

It started after 1:00 that day in Entrance Square, mii. I was performing my magic tricks as usual when I found a female guest who was looking under the weather, mii. Her name was Tomino Tomiko-san (age 59), and I decided to pick her up and carry her to the medical center, mii. I should have asked the part-

timer girl, but I'd been having face-time with the guests for about 30 minutes anyway, and it was just about time for me to get backstage, so I took it upon myself to look after her, mii.

Tomiko-san (age 59) was fashionably dressed in Shimamura clothing, and was suffering from heatstroke, but once I took her backstage and got her some water, she seemed to be feeling pretty good, mii. Then Tomiko-san (age 59) apologized to me and started talking about how things weren't going well with her husband. Apparently they hadn't slept together in over ten years. It was a really sad story, mii. I'm a nice guy, so I patiently listened to the story of Tomiko-san (age 59).

Just then, Tomiko-san (age 59) started coming on to me! She leaned in with dewy eyes and said "I'm sorry, Tiramii-san. I... I'm just so lonely," mii! Then she started rubbing my tummy, mii... It was an obvious seduction, mii!

Of course, I refused her easily, mii! I'm a professional mascot, mii! I can easily withstand such a basic seduction for the sake of my job, mii! I tried to wind things down without offending Tomiko-san (age 59), mii. But that's when Isuzu-chan arrived, mii!

I'm sure it seemed to Isuzu-chan that I had brought Tomiko-san (age 59) backstage to engage in lewd activities, mii! In a trembling voice, she said "Tiramii, what are you doing?" and pulled out her musket, mii.

2: How I dealt with it and the aftereffects That's when things really went downhill, mii! Tomiko-san (age 59) started screaming and shouting "Help! Help! This mascot is trying to rape me!" mii!

Tomiko-san (age 59) was probably afraid that her husband would find out, so she tried to make herself look like the victim, mii!

Thanks to that, I got killed by Isuzu-chan and was also called a pervert, mii. All my co-workers heard the commotion and came running, and they said mean(?) things like "I'm disappointed in you, fumo," and "Your interests really are wide-ranging, ron," mii.

Then Kanie-kun came by and smoothed things over so we ended up not having a lawsuit, mii. But there's still a blemish on my name, and I've been ordered to write this apology letter, mii. I don't think it's fair treatment, mii.

3: Reflections and plans for future improvement

What should I be sorry for, mii?! Not even I would go after a 59-year-old woman, mii! (Well, I can't say that for sure! Depends on the situation! I might! Probably?! ...Possibly?) Actually, my record was Ume-san who was 82 (at the time) but that was a special case! It's not my usual bread-and-butter, is the point!

The point is, that woman (age 59) set me up, mii! She was probably after my savings (I do have some in UFA Bank: about 80,000 yen).

Hmm... But if it's not that, she might have just been overwhelmed by my sex appeal, mii. Maybe I put out pheromones that are only detectable by older women? I'll have to do some research, mii. And if I'm being honest, Tomiko-san (aged 59) had really excellent tummy-rubbing technique. She knew my tummy fur very well, mii! Reminds me of my dead granny, mii! It was much better than a girl in her teens or twenties could do, mii. Mature women are the best!

So to be fair, if Isuzu-chan hadn't shown up then, I probably would have let her rub my tummy more. In that regard, my main regret was that I didn't take Tomiko-san (aged 59) somewhere more private instead of somewhere Isuzu-chan could find us so easily, mii. I guess that's what I'm sorry about, mii. Too bad!

Acting manager's response to the apology Now that I think about it, I'm not sure why it's a problem for an older woman to be rubbing the tummy of a plush mascot, but all our real cast insist it was bad, so I assume this is problematic behavior in magical realms (even if it's a mystery to me).

Based on what you've written, you don't seem to be sorry at all, either, so whatever. Do what you want. But if we get sued by a 70-year-old woman next time, I'm not coming to your rescue. You can take on whatever damage costs or name-tarnishing that comes with it.

By the way, Tiramii. You really are a pervert.

* * * * *

Maple Industries Co, Ltd, Amagi Brilliant Park To: Acting Manager Kanie Seiya

Manager

Latifah Fleuranza

Letter of Apology On day X of month O, I, Latifah Fleuranza, started a fire in the Maple Castle kitchen. I could not regret this incident more.

1: How the incident occurred

A bit after noon on day X of month O, I was engaged in my usual daily cooking (preparing croquettes), when I became distracted by a phone call, and the oil overheated as a result.

I had no idea that the pan was that hot, but it appears that some leftover crumbs caught flame in the oil. The next thing I knew, the fire was enormous.

I ran everywhere looking for the fire extinguishers, but I did not know where they were. Nick-san (the food department's leader), who happened to be present, laid a wet towel over the fire and extinguished it.

2: How I dealt with it and the aftereffects It is quite fortunate that the only damage was a burned pot and a stain of soot on the ventilation fan. I spent two hours cleaning it, and then resumed my labor. There was almost no damage to the croquettes I was about to fry (about 50 of them), but for safety's sake, I decided not to sell them. I simply gave them for free to cast members who wanted them.

3: Reflections and plans for future improvement

I am terribly sorry. Cooking croquettes has become so routine that I let my guard down; I cannot apologize enough for what happened.

I was talking to Kanie-sama on the phone, and it appears that I became too elated to think. I understand that this is no excuse. It is my own carelessness that is to blame for everything, and my inability to remember the location of the fire extinguisher further exacerbated the trouble. In the future, I must remember its location, so that this never happens again.

Furthermore, if you deem that I am too incompetent for the task, I shall never

approach the kitchen again. I will accept any punishment you deem appropriate. I am truly sorry.

Acting manager's response to the apology Hey, don't worry about it! It's my fault for calling you then! Seriously, are you okay? You're not really hurt? If not, then everything's fine.

Don't worry about punishment. Just be more careful next time.

Anyway, please don't torture yourself about this. Everyone loves your croquettes, so just keep up the good work. I know you're upset, but try to cheer up, okay?!

The End

"Brilliant Report (Apology Edition)" first published in Dragon Magazine, Issue 1, 2016

Afterword Sorry for the long wait! This is AmaBri's 8th volume.

It's been six months since the 7th volume. This was really, really hard to write. As for why it was so hard, well... there are several reasons.

Er. First, there was *Witcher 3* (a masterpiece), okay? And *Fallout 4* (too buggy!), okay? And *Dragon Quest Builders* (I can't wait for the sequel), okay? Then you add Netflix and Hulu in there (*House of Cards*! Kevin Spacey is amazing!). Oh, and Amazon Prime too, okay? Who has time to work?

It's all been really rough! Try to have some sympathy!

...Sorry, that's a joke. About half of it is, at least. Half of it.

Anyway, this 8th volume is the result of a lot of hard thinking I did about the series's future. Up to about the end of the year, I really was considering moving AmaBri and starting a new series, *Sanami Brilliant Park*, from volume one. But it just didn't come together. It didn't work. In a sense, I was as tortured about it as Seiya-kun. Maybe more! Seriously, I don't know what to do next!

But I think the next volume will have a lot of slapstick stories. Too much serious stuff can be stifling.

Oh, and I have an announcement to make.

Upcoming work schedule: AmaBri will keep coming out, but I'm helping with the planning of a new *Full Metal Panic!* anime. I'm writing the scenario too, and there's location scouting to do. Lots of work! I can't say for sure when it's coming just yet, but I think we'll have some bonus material coming out very soon.

Sorry to talk about my work for another company, but I'll also start writing *Cop Craft* soon. Sorry for making you wait for that too (sweats).

Ahh, my troubles are dual core. I need to get it all together, but it's impossible to write so many things at once... I've tried a lot of things in the past 20 years and it's never worked out, so I just don't think I can handle it. I give up.

I've also stopped tweeting and blogging lately. Sorry. I'd gotten kind of sick of it, and I've never been much for keeping a diary! Plus I don't want to write something I shouldn't and accidentally cause a big fuss! And also... in a world where everyone's shouting "Me! Me!" I think silence is golden.

Also, some terrible things have been happening in the region around Kumamoto. I hope that the people suffering from the disaster can read this and it will make them feel better, however slightly. Last year, I traveled to Kumamoto for a friend's wedding (the horse meat sashimi and shochu was amazing!) so I'm pretty down about it. I'll go to hang out again once things are under control.

One last thing. While I was writing the short story about the culture festival, I got some news that the writer Tomohiro Matsu passed away. He wrote *Listen to Me, Girls. I Am Your Father!* which was also illustrated by Yuka Nakajima. We'd done panels together at Comiket Special and such, and gone drinking at hot springs hotels, and we have a lot of other fun memories together. Rest in peace.

Thanks to Biino's everlasting cheer, I managed to finish the short story. Thank you, Biino.

I hope to turn in volume 9 ASAP. Well, see you!

May 2016 Gatou Shouji

CELEBRATING

**THE COMPLETION
OF VOLUME 8!**

I'm
Muse,
15
years
old!

2016.06
Nakajima
Yuka

Sylphie

**WE'VE BECOME HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, LIKE WE ALWAYS WANTED!
WE'LL GET TO ENJOY LEARNING, ROMANCE,
AND ALL ASPECTS OF SCHOOL LIFE! ♡**

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Prologue](#)

[1: Kanie Seiya Has No Drive](#)

[2: EXODUS](#)

[3: In the Ruins](#)

[4: Hotel California](#)

[5: Nick of Time](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Amagi High School Culture Festival!](#)

[Brilliant Report \(Apology Edition\)](#)

[Afterword](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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Amagi Brilliant Park: Volume 8

by Shouji Gatou

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#08



Amagi Brilliant Park

Shouji Gatou

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